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Rituals, Roots, and Rectangles: The Classical Tradition in Early American Portraiture

Lauren Jessica Brown Suber

College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

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RITUALS, ROOTS, AND RECTANGLES
The Classical Tradition in Early American Portraiture

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the American Studies Program
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
Lauren Suber
1992
APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Author

Approved, December 1992

Margaretta Lovell
Dittman Professor of Material Culture

Graham Hood
Carlisle H. Humelsine Curator
Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

Miles Chappell
Chancellor Professor of Fine Arts
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This study of early-American portraiture began with an examination of patrons and painters in eighteenth-century Williamsburg. The initial focus was a small group of portraits to be included in an exhibit called "The Faces of Williamsburg." These portraits are listed in appendix A. This group of fifteen portraits revealed themselves as an excellent microcosm of the larger system explored here. The catalytic study group of paintings was biased to achieve a chronological representation of sitters and artists in eighteenth-century Williamsburg; rather than skewing the results of a broader study of Anglo-American portraiture, the Williamsburg group underscores the fundamental concept of cultural hierarchy expressed in the images as a whole. The reader expecting biographical information on the portrait subjects and the artists who painted them will be disappointed, as will the reader who values discussions of individual artists' styles. It is my hope that the reader who wishes to place one aspect of eighteenth-century material culture within the broad context of Western cultural traditions will be intrigued by the ideas presented here.
I am grateful to many individuals for their assistance with this project. Dr. Miles Chappell introduced me to the portrait tradition during my undergraduate studies in fine arts. That interest, germinated on the campus, took root across the street in the fertile foundation that is Colonial Williamsburg. There Graham Hood and his curatorial staff cultivated my knowledge of the eighteenth century with seemingly effortless enthusiasm—so much so that often neither teacher nor student knew a lesson was underway.

I am indebted to decorative arts librarian Susan Shames for her amazing command of the resources and for her constant encouragement. John Ingram, Liz Ackert and their colleagues in the Foundation library cheerfully assisted no matter how arduous the search. Photographers Hans Lorenz and Craig McDougal gave their time and expertise often on a moment’s notice. When my study of dynamic symmetry led me to explore Georgian facades Betty Leviner and Mark R. Wenger were there to steady my ladder. Former colleague Leslie Grigsby brought me "within compass" and David Meschutt was always eager to share his encyclopedic memory. Jon Prown and Anne Verplanck provided intellectual encouragement and practical guidance when the tensions of work and school mounted. By volunteering his time at the department of collections Paul Knox helped me to stay focused on my research. The technical expertise of Davelin Forrest and Beth Nagle made the physical production of this document
almost painless.

I feel especially fortunate to have been in the right place at the right time for Dr. Margarettta Lovell to advise my research; she will be missed when she returns to the other side of the Blue Ridge. Thank you, Margarettta, for new perspectives.

Most importantly, I thank my husband Bill for his patience, love, and support.
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ABSTRACT

This study of eighteenth-century Anglo-American portraiture moves beyond discussions of subjects and artists to explore broad cultural beliefs and practices. Period usage of the subjective term "likeness" and visual evidence of painters' design practices are considered in order to assess the portraits' credibility as cultural witnesses.

In an analysis of the descriptor "likeness" eighteenth-century theory is examined in an attempt to understand eighteenth-century practice. Conversely, the author considers portrait formats, proportions, and framing devices as examples of eighteenth-century practice in order to extrapolate eighteenth-century theory. Use of extant documentary evidence allows the study of one subset of material culture (two-dimensional images) to reveal a broader cultural practice (architectural design). Reynolds, Dryden, Greenblatt and Hersey actively contribute to this project to extract meaning from a seemingly straightforward term and a seemingly opaque technical question.

Understanding the term "likeness" as a subjective ranking within the Chain of Being provides insight into the eighteenth-century Anglo-American's process of self-definition. Discovery of the use of dynamic symmetry in design practices expands that comprehension to include recognition of visual boundaries as symbols of behavioral limits.
RITUALS, ROOTS, AND RECTANGLES

The Classical Tradition in Early American Portraiture
INTRODUCTION

Portraits depict people--people of the present, portrayed for perpetuity, by painters usually paid by patrons. Portraits also depict a People; in the case of this study, the portraits are of eighteenth-century Anglo-Americans. The obvious motivations for individuals to commission portraits then were not so different from our desires to take photographs of ourselves today: vanity, dreams of immortality, the demarcation of life events and the status wrought by one’s accomplishments, the evocation of the image of a distant loved one, or in the case of public portraiture, the representation of power. Less obvious reasons for the taking of likenesses include the tracking of inheritable wealth or maintenance of the social hierarchy, as explained by Margaretta Lovell, and the complex process of self-fashioning described by Stephen Greenblatt.

We peruse these old pictures for clues to the sitters’ existence on this earth. The images are documents of history, leaves of individual and collective family trees. But portraits are more than simple documents of people of the past; they are artifacts conveying via a visual system
cultural beliefs and practices of a segment of a society.

Before we attempt to use the portraits as cultural evidence, we must first determine if they are reliable witnesses. Written evidence from the period suggests that a portrait evaluated as a "good likeness" two centuries ago might not hold up in court today as a factual, two-dimensional rendering of an eighteenth-century individual. Written statements of eighteenth-century painters and sitters alike tell the modern viewer not to expect a specific likeness from artists working in the formal, academic manner; the established artistic tradition in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Anglo-America aimed to produce "general," "universal," images which placed the sitters in the vast continuum of time and space rather than in a specific date and place. What modern parlance would call the opposing styles of "idealism" and "realism" in portraiture was understood then as the difference between "universal" and "specific" portrayals of the human form. Once this crucial difference in eighteenth- and twentieth-century visual expectation is understood, the images do indeed bear up as reliable cultural evidence. When the student learns to suspend her twentieth-century expectations she begins to understand the degree of realism employed in the painters’ interpretations of the sitters and the cultural expectations those interpretations fulfilled.
Some scholars have undervalued the need of eighteenth-century individuals to define themselves in terms of the broad spectrum of the universal chain of being. Therefore, the meaning of a "good likeness" has continued to confuse them. Perplexed by hundreds of images which could be of the same or closely related individuals, some students of the genre claim that the realistic portrayal of the sitter’s face was not as important as the portrayal of his or her fashionable clothing and pose. Timothy Breen has suggested that an important function of portraits in carved and gilded frames was to complement the furniture in a room. Portraits did indeed complement the furniture as well as the proportions of the architectural space itself; that idea will be explored below in a discussion of the proportions of portrait canvases, but to claim portraiture’s relationship to other material things as its primary reason for being is an oversimplification. These recent attempts to judge "likeness" and its value to eighteenth-century artists and patrons are much more reasonable and thought-provoking than some popular theories cluttering the scholarship. One of the most repeated, least stimulating conjectures presents second-rate artists, working in primitive conditions in the colonies, who produced flat, unconvincing, look-alike portraits because they simply could not do any better. Another questionable explanation for visual similarities in the painted figures argues that families intermarried so
frequently in the eighteenth century that a limited gene pool resulted in colonial clones. Although recent theories on likeness broaden the frame of inquiry, their focus on social status and interior decoration ignores the most fundamental aspect of portraiture: the definition of self and one's place within society and the hierarchy of the universe. The academic painter attempted to capture good likenesses by generalizing (idealizing) subjects out of a specific date and place into the universal continuum of time and space; the finished portraits fit within an architectural hierarchy devised by universal laws of mathematics, geometry, and harmonic proportion.

Art historians have argued that successful portraits blend both the physical and mental patterns of personae, but the spiritual ideas and beliefs that also shaped the sitters' personalities have been largely ignored. (Ministers and other ecclesiastical subjects have been exceptions to this oversight because of the obvious religious attributes of their costumes and props, such as bibles, vestments, pulpits, and "heavenly" vistas beyond open windows.) Although related, "religion" and "spirituality" are not synonymous. Perhaps scholars have shied away from a discussion of the spiritual symbolism in portraits because "spiritual" is the kind of word that makes some people (particularly scientists and academic thinkers) uncomfortable. Spirituality, whether our own or that of
people two hundred years ago, is difficult to discuss because it is difficult to define. The Oxford English Dictionary offers the following definitions for "spiritual":

concerning the spirit or higher moral qualities, esp. as regarded in a religious aspect; concerned with sacred or ecclesiastical things or matters, as distinguished from secular affairs; a person’s standing to another, or to others, in a spiritual relationship; devout, holy, pious, morally good, having spiritual tendencies or instincts; pertaining to spirit, in either a religious or intellectual aspect; of the nature of a spirit or incorporeal supernatural essence; immaterial; emanating from the intellect or higher faculties of the mind; exhibiting a high degree of refinement of thought or feeling.

The number of times "spirit" or "spiritual" is found in the definition of "spiritual" emphasizes the ambiguity of the word. For the purposes of this study, "spirituality" is understood as human beings’ acknowledgment of an hierarchical universe ruled by God. Although the nature of God’s rule was debatable, it was generally understood by eighteenth-century citizens that God reigned over the heavens and monarchs ruled the earth as his representatives. Monarchs represented and enforced a rigidly defined social order that grouped humans by birthright and economic power or the lack thereof. That most fundamental aspect of portraiture, the definition of self and one’s place within society and the hierarchy of the universe, is a rewarding perspective for an investigation of the interchange between painter and patron. Within that framework questions regarding the selection of a canvas’s shape and size, its
composition, its symbolic attributes, and the degree of likeness displayed reveal important cultural values and beliefs.

An awareness of the physical, mental, and spiritual evidence in eighteenth-century portraits reveals one of the culture’s fundamental beliefs: humans are part of an hierarchical system. The person in a portrait is a symbol of a person within a family within a dynasty within a social group within a nation. The portrait in turn is a two-dimensional configuration within a three-dimensional room within a group of rooms within a community of structures. The act of having a likeness taken may be regarded as a ritualistic act of self-definition within this hierarchical system encompassing humankind in the circle of God.

One reason why the spiritual symbolism of eighteenth-century portraits has not yet been explored is the textual hegemony of Age of Enlightenment thought. The new literary trend emphasized rational, scientific thought. Because any new trend is a reaction against some widely accepted idea or practice it is useful to recognize that "adherence to the old system is after all the rule, and it is of the change not the persistence that we require some account." The insistence on rational thought in Age of Enlightenment dogma has functioned as a decoy diverting seekers from the trail of spiritual evidence in the material record. The age’s new literary emphasis on rational thought overshadowed the
culture’s residual reliance on superstition, astrology, and religious faith in daily life. These varied and interrelated forces combined in complex ways to affect the lives of eighteenth-century citizens, but they ceased to be explored or even acknowledged in the written record. If a culture’s beliefs are to be thoroughly explored, a study of the written record must be recognized as only one tool available to the student. As one scholar recognizes, 

... literature seems to me to be a kind of by-product. It occupies far too small a part in the whole activity of a nation, even of its intellectual activity, to serve as a complete indication of the many forces which are at work, or as an adequate moral barometer of the general moral state. The attempt to establish such a condition too closely, seems to me to lead to a good many very edifying but not the less fallacious conclusions.¹⁰

A much richer, but usually subtler, register of cultural phenomena is found in the material objects created by a group of people. Portraits, as objects created by people to record other people, are a valuable resource for studying a culture’s beliefs and practices.

The revelation that eighteenth-century artists used compasses and geometric principles to establish the shapes of portrait canvases, as well as to position some sitters within painted oval "windows," (see figs. 11a, 14, and 19c, chapter II) points to the enduring importance of astrological beliefs in popular eighteenth-century culture. The compass was one tool used since ancient times to take the measure of all things and to reckon the heavens. So
important was the compass as a measuring tool that the verb
"to compass" entered the English language meaning not only
"to measure," but also to live one's life within prescribed
moral limits. The portraits confirm that astrology
manifested itself in the general population long after the
intellectual elite pronounced it passé.

It is tempting to reduce history to a series of
movements in linear progression with tidy divisions of
cultural thought and practice. Therefore, it is commonly
believed that scientific thought in the eighteenth century
began to overshadow religious faith and totally eclipsed the
study and practice of astrology. As Patrick Curry observes,
in the late seventeenth century . . . a dramatic
transformation took place. Astrology fell from
unprecedented influence, during the English
Revolution, to what is often described as its
death, after the Restoration. Yet this phenomenon
is seldom discussed by historians. [But] did
astrology really die, or decline?11

He thinks not. Noting historians' descriptions of the
course of astrology as either one of disappearance, decline,
or survival, Curry suggests that ". . . all three
descriptions are largely true, in different social and
intellectual contexts."12 He argues for an understanding
of three kinds of astrology:

. . . 'low' or popular astrology, 'middling' or
judicial astrology, and 'high' or cosmological-
philosophical astrology. Although the last kind
can be said to have disappeared, nowhere do we
find the single or simple death of astrology. As
Mrs. Hester Thrale shrewdly remarked in 1790,
'Superstition is said to be driven out of the
world - no such Thing, it is only driven out of
Books and Talk.'

Dominant arguments in the written record often exist to contradict or eliminate a prevailing set of beliefs or values. Some values and beliefs are so fundamental to a culture that they need no verbal or written expression. Some values and beliefs are so threatening to the power structure that they are suppressed, but one should not assume that phenomena absent in the written record were absent from cultural practice. Instead one should go beyond the written record into the material culture of the period for evidence of behavior so general that it was taken for granted, or so controversial that it was suppressed in print.

It was the search for destiny and universal order that led to the study of astrology. "If any one attitude united the astrologers of the seventeenth century it was an overwhelming intellectual curiosity - a desire to reduce things to order." Eighteenth-century artists revealed this desire and their culture’s remaining dependence on astrology in two ways. First, the painters’ use of the compass to employ the principles of dynamic symmetry (see appendix C) endowed the portraits with a kind of cosmic order first interpreted by the ancient Greeks. Dynamic symmetry is a design system by which human beings since ancient times have attempted to bring order and unity to their world. Secondly, the artists’ frequent use of the
iconography of the compass allowed them to identify their sitters as moral beings who knew their proper places in the hierarchy of the universe (see figs. 27a-b, chapter III).

Because astrology was linked to pagan practice many preachers were outspoken regarding its spiritual dangers. They feared that the vogue for astrology might lead to the replacement of the Christian God by the planetary divinities of classical antiquity, whose memory was preserved in the names of the months and the days of the week. Astrology, they recalled, had begun as a religion rather than a science, and the Bible contained warnings against star-worship. The celestial bodies were eternal, universal and allegedly omnipotent; might not their contemplation turn into a sort of mystical communion?15

Pressure from the pulpit was good reason for the populace to suppress its adherence to astrological beliefs, but many who lived superstitiously may not have easily distinguished behaviors approved or disapproved by the church. As Keith Thomas explains, the ministers’ concerns were not unjustified, for "no simple formula can summarise the hopeless confusion between astrology and religion in the minds of so many of their adherents."16 One seventeenth-century client of English astrologer John Booker sent him a letter asking for his predictions, but added a postscript seeking reassurance of the ultimate authority of God over the stars:

‘Whether, notwithstanding that the stars show very plainly many cross influences and events upon men (both good men as well as evil men), yet I say whether is it not common that upon both,
especially good men who are actually in the state of grace and known themselves to be the adopted sons of God, I say whether doth not these influences commonly fail to take effect upon them, either totally or for the most part?"¹⁷

The astrologers themselves "represented almost every shade of religious opinion, from Roman Catholic to Quaker, but they all claimed that their art was compatible with their religion, and that the heavenly bodies were merely instruments of God’s will."¹⁸ This blurred distinction between astrology and religion is traced by Thomas back to ancient times:

Early Christianity had sometimes been taken for a solar religion, and the Anglo-Saxon kings had to legislate against star-worship. The pagan tradition of planetary deities also survived in medieval iconography. The signs of the zodiac decorated many English churches and may have helped to shape popular religious attitudes.¹⁹

It is no coincidence that illustrations of the signs of the zodiac were often depicted as an oval or circular border encompassing a human figure (see fig. 34, chapter III), the same way some sitters are framed in a painted oval within the rectilinear canvas in eighteenth-century portraits.

Paradoxically, the new science of the Enlightenment cast more shadows on the boundaries between astronomy, astrology and religion:

The new science . . . was rapidly altering men’s view of nature. The members of the Royal Society were all good theists and would have been perplexed had they been told that, in the 19th century, science and religion would come to seem incompatible. Science in the 17th century was principally concerned with the physical sciences--with astronomy, physics, and to a lesser degree,
chemistry; and the discoveries in these sciences were reassuring in their revelation of universal and immutable law and order, clear revelations of the wisdom and goodness of God in His creation... The whole creation appeared a revelation of the mind, intent, and nature of the Creator. The truest truths proved to be the clearest, the simplest, the most general."

Much of Enlightenment thought utilized existing notions of hierarchy in the natural world. The need to recognize this hierarchy and to define boundaries of existence within it is seen in diverse creations of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-centuries. The Anatomy of a Melancholy written by Robert Burton in 1628 is a study "in three partitions, with their severall sections, members & subsections" illustrated by the printer’s plates "in ten distinct squares." Echoing Burton's stratification is Richard Bradley's Works of Nature, "endeavoring to set forth the several gradations remarkable in the mineral, vegetable, and animal parts of the creation, tending to the composition of a scale of life," published in 1721. This same desire to classify the world and its inhabitants is seen in Alexander Pope's Essay on Man, written in 1733, which declares the fundamental order and goodness of the systematic universe and the rightness of man's place in it. Not only the creation of man, but also the creations of man proffered themselves for such classification, as seen in James Gibbs' 1738 work explaining the Rules for Drawing the Several Parts of Architecture, in which the parts of buildings are broken into categories of design. Even this small list of
eighteenth-century classifiers would be incomplete without the name of Carolus Linnaeus, whose *Systema naturae* of 1753 described his system of binomial nomenclature, still used by biologists and botanists today to assign order to the natural world. In each of these works human beings used "God-given" powers of observation and reason, along with the laws of mathematics and geometry, to classify the heirarchy of being and to define boundaries within the natural order of the universe. Like a botanist assigning species, genus, and family to one of God’s creations, people commissioning portraits sought to classify or rank themselves within individual families as well as within the larger human family.

This quest for order is as old as mankind; in defining and classifying their world, eighteenth-century people sought to understand and perpetuate their culture’s social, political, economic, and religious myths. Since the beginning of time, people have created myths to explain the ambiguity of life. A culture’s myths attempt to establish order and harmony in a potentially chaotic world. Once the myths become established, they are reaffirmed through ceremony and ritual. "The myths and rites [are] means of putting the mind in accord with the body and the way of life in accord with the way that nature dictates." By enacting a myth through ritual, one "[experiences] a mythological life. And it’s out of that participation that
one can learn to live spiritually."  

Eighteenth-century Anglo-Americans’ macro-myth was the Judeo-Christian story of creation and salvation, tempered with residual belief in Greco-Roman astrology. Their most influential micro-myth outlined the socio-economic and political positions assigned individuals by a rigid system of classification based on birthright. Maintenance of this social order depended largely on the preservation of inheritable wealth within dynasties. As noted by Lovell, having a likeness taken could validate this social order and one’s place in it. The act of commissioning a portrait, then, was a ritualistic affirmation of self and the social order. The ritual could be enacted at different, perhaps multiple, times in an individual’s life. Having a likeness taken sometimes commemorated a rite of passage for an individual who had come of age, married, had children, inherited wealth, or attained some form of power or status. A posthumous portrait marked the final rite of passage, while the ritualistic presentation of a portrait to a distant loved one eased the trial of separation.

The language of portraiture in the eighteenth century—"taking a likeness"—connotes an aggressive act; the phrase suggests that part of the essence of the individual was compromised, if not removed, during the procedure. George Hersey’s discussion of ancient Greek sacrificial rituals suggests interesting parallels to the seemingly distant
practice of painting portraits which underscores the spiritual nature of the images. The Greeks made a practice of reconstructing the "victim" (the sacrificed animal) on the altar by assembling its bones and draping the skin over it. This practice, they believed, not only turned the murder into a sacrifice, but also allowed the creature to be reborn, or immortalized, thus memorializing the fact that its body had once held the god’s soul. Before the sacrificial act, the participants gathered at the altar drew a circle around themselves in the dirt to declare the area a sacred precinct. Similarly, the eighteenth-century portrait painter created a special area for his subject’s effigy to be constructed by making his canvas a particular size and shape; in some cases he added the extra distinction of an oval window around the sitter. Whether these painterly practices were understood at the time to be "sacred," "magical," or merely "traditional" is subject to discussion. Eighteenth-century citizens may have had no more understanding of the origins of the rituals they practiced than we do today, but those rituals maintained a very real presence in their lives. Ritual is evinced again and again in the material culture of the period, ranging from church silver to wares for the dinner table (sometimes including "temple" centerpieces!), from the specially designed chairs reserved for high-ranking individuals in public buildings to the hierarchical ordering of
architectural spaces and town plans that encompassed all those things and behaviors. It should be no surprise that the portraits hung in those highly ordered spaces reflected the ritualistic behavior of the people in them. It is no etymological accident that "ritual" and "spirituality" have a common root.

It is not an easy leap from twentieth-century visual inspection of eighteenth-century portraits to an understanding of the spiritual content therein. Yet questions regarding "likeness" in portraiture do lead to the exploration of modes of self-presentation and then to the definition of one's position within the boundaries of social and metaphysical hierarchy. An understanding of the human desire to accept, test, and/or recreate those boundaries leads to a realization of the significance of the canvases' proportions. From that point the frequent use of a painted oval within the rectangle on the picture plane provides a vital clue to the underlying use of geometry both to establish the parameters of the composition and to impart important spiritual symbolism. These pictorial traditions encompassing eighteenth-century painters and their sitters are rooted in the spiritual beliefs and rituals of ancient Greece.
CHAPTER I
CONCEPTS OF LIKENESS

The countenance is the theatre on which the soul exhibits itself: here must its emanations be studied and caught. Whoever cannot seize these emanations, cannot paint; and whoever cannot paint these is no portrait painter.¹

John Caspar Lavater, 1794

In order to understand the meaning of "likeness" to the eighteenth-century painter and patron, it is helpful first to recognize the traditional methods for studying portraiture. The standard art-historical approach focuses on identification of the sitter, artist, date, and place or "school" in which the work was created. The process is usually continued with a value judgment about the painting’s merit, based on the style of the artist and the stages of his or her career. The latter is then in turn placed within a larger art-historical context of artistic "movements." Much more difficult, and infinitely rarer, is the quest to place the artifacts in a synchronic cognitive frame of reference--to understand the cultural forces that shaped the painter’s and sitter’s expectations for the finished product. The student of portraiture is faced with a profusion of publications discussing the images with retrospective interpretations of meaning and worth. Few
authors have expressed the need to know what the pictures meant to the sitters themselves and to the people around them.

Before one can begin to use pre-photographic portraits as primary documents to examine a people’s belief system, a basic assumption regarding the accuracy of the images must be considered. The portrait canvas was not a mirror or camera that captured an instantaneous likeness; a human being created an illusion with a piece of cloth and some pigments to transform a living, three-dimensional person into a two-dimensional image. The portrait in oil on canvas, then, is a translation, resulting from the delicate mixture of the artist’s sensory perceptions, social prescriptions, and abilities as a painter.

Because the finished picture was the result of the artist’s subjective rendering and the sitter’s subjective expectations, one is compelled to examine the physical evidence presented by the portraits closely--perhaps skeptically. A careful analysis of the objects within their cultural context is required if one hopes to glean indications of the subjects’ beliefs and practices. Perplexingly, objective analysis of a large group of early American portraits reveals many images that are suspiciously similar in appearance, not only in visage, but in dress and setting as well. Portraits by artists such as Robert Feke, John Hesselius, and John Wollaston, whose careers spanned a
thirty-year period, are often so similar in appearance that their works are sometimes misattributed to each other in the literature and in museum collections. Whereas a certain amount of similarity is to be expected within the work of a single artist (Charles Willson Peale’s canvases are easily identified based on his style, as are Gilbert Stuart’s, for example), the formulaic approach being discussed here stretches across artists and decades in the eighteenth century. These pictorial similarities, particularly in an era before mass production of images, suggest the existence of a visual system understood by the artists and their patrons.

A useful framework for exploring this visual system is Stephen Greenblatt’s "conditions common to most instances of self-fashioning" (see appendix B for list). Although Greenblatt’s study examined six Renaissance writers, his analysis is a useful model for the visual as well as the literary definition of self. All of the conditions are directly applicable to portraiture with the exception of the first, which needs to be broadened slightly to encompass the paintings. Greenblatt chose to limit his case studies to middle-class writers, claiming that "none of the figures inherits a title, an ancient family tradition or hierarchical status that might have rooted personal identity in the identity of a clan or caste." One sees that this artificially controlled group appropriately simplified his
test cases by removing one variable. Since most Anglo-American eighteenth-century portraits are of the society's upper class, it is useful to apply Margaretta Lovell's understanding of the pictures as tracers of inheritable wealth. That is, portraits can be seen as defenders of the established social order; they visually delineate the movement and retention of wealth and status from one generation to the next. In doing so, the portraits help define the family and its members as deserving possessors. Using Greenblatt's method, some of the sitters had a headstart in their quest for self-definition, but the portraits nevertheless played a role in the self-fashioning process by maintaining and enhancing that definition.

Greenblatt’s second condition for self-fashioning requires submission to an absolute authority. For the subjects of this study, that authority is God and the natural order of the universe, evinced by the hierarchical ordering of Anglo-American society. The realization of this condition depends upon the fulfillment of conditions three and four:

self-fashioning is achieved in relation to something perceived as alien, strange, or hostile . . . which must be discovered or invented in order to be attacked and destroyed . . . the alien . . . is a distorted image of the authority.

That is, the self is defined by opposing forces that are, in turn, defined by their opposition. The alien is the feared loss of familial continuity, social hierarchy, order, and
stability. Because portraits were often commissioned upon marriage and the birth of heirs, they may be viewed as signs of achievement in face of the alien forces of infertility and mortality which posed constant threats to the stability of the family. In at least one instance, as shown by Lovell, a portrait was commissioned to recapture what death had prematurely stolen. Sir William Pepperell instructed the artist to include his dead wife and male heir in the family’s group portrait; if he could not in reality preserve his family name and insure the security of his fortune, he could at least create a visual symbol of the order and stability he so desired. This example of fiction in portraiture is an important admonition against exceedingly literal interpretations of symbolic images. In the Pepperrell portrait the fiction of order and stability vanquishes the truths of life and death.

Also important for understanding the visual system of the portraits are Greenblatt’s fifth and sixth conditions for self-fashioning, which state that "one man’s authority is another man’s alien [and] when one authority or alien is destroyed, another takes its place." The author’s dichotomy of authority and alien connotes the dual forces at work in the universe to create the tension of life itself: yin and yang, material and spiritual, darkness and light, male and female, etc. Most salient for this examination of eighteenth-century Anglo-American cultural beliefs and
practices are the dualities of general/specific and order/disorder. Encoded in the portraits are clues to the subjects’ quests for self-definition, self-control, and social harmony.

Because of these dichotomies the twentieth-century viewer detects two broad "styles" of representation in eighteenth-century portraits. Some portraits appear to flatter the sitter, smoothing out flaws and individual facial characteristics, while others seem to present the sitter with uncompromising verisimilitude. These different modes are not accountable to artists’ individual styles or mannerisms, as seen by comparing two contemporary portraits by Kneller (figures 1 and 2). Applying Greenblatt’s first six conditions to the concept of "likeness" in eighteenth-century portraits enables the student to consider the tensions influencing painters’ and patrons’ choices.

Because the subjects did not paint their own portraits, but relied on artists for the translation of their fashioned selves, it is essential to understand the terms both groups used to evaluate the finished product. It could be argued that the self-fashioning technique of portraiture is actually self-definition "once removed"; for that reason it is necessary to understand the patrons’ and painters’ use of the term "likeness."

Turning to Samuel Johnson’s Dictionary of the English Language (1755) as a source for the meaning of "likeness" as
Fig. 2. John Locke, Sir Godfrey Kneller, London, c.1705. The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. Photo courtesy of VMFA.
understood by the eighteenth-century mind, the student finds three definitions: the first, "resemblance; similitude"; the second, "form; appearance"; the third, "one who resembles another." These are seemingly straightforward definitions, until Johnson's examples of usage quoting John Dryden are considered:

A translator is to make his author appear as charming as he can, provided he maintains his character, and makes him not unlike himself. Translation is a kind of drawing after the life, where there is a double sort of likeness, a good one and a bad one. In such cases there will be found a better likeness, and a worse; and the better is constantly to be chosen.8

Although Dryden's first statement refers to literary works, the words "painter" and "subject" can be substituted for his use of "translator" and "author" to achieve an accurate assessment of the meaning of "likeness" in portraiture. Dryden's provision that the translator should "maintain [the subject's] character, and [make] him not unlike himself" leads the student of portraiture to question the importance of "character" in evaluating the quality of a likeness.

Some material culturists are skeptical of reading too much into an eighteenth-century portrait, claiming that a modern analysis of a sitter's "character" or "psyche" is simply that--a modern analysis, with no basis in eighteenth-century thought.9 Scholars should indeed be cautious in applying current cultural assumptions to their analyses of artifacts, events, and people, but too scientific an approach, particularly when human beings are a variable in
the study, can leave much undiscovered. Even Sir Joshua Reynolds, whose discourses on art espoused highminded goals of order, proportion, and classical allusions, acknowledged the need to let intuition, or feeling, sometimes rule the mind:

There is in the commerce of life, as in Art, a sagacity which is far from being contradictory to right reason, and is superior to any occasional exercise of that faculty, which supersedes it; and does not wait for the slow progress of deduction, but goes at once, by what appears a kind of intuition, to the conclusion . . . . This impression is the result of the accumulated experience of our whole life . . . . I mean to caution you against . . . . an unfounded distrust of the imagination and feeling, in favour of narrow, partial, confined, argumentative theories . . . . Reason, without doubt, must ultimately determine every thing; at this minute it is required to inform us when that very reason is to give way to feeling.¹⁰

One begins to see in this passage the artist’s belief that a great portrait captures more than a mere physical likeness; a good likeness grasps the essence or spirit of an individual, rather than simply delineating his or her physical being.

This criterion was understood by Virginia’s earliest art collector. A letter of 1736 from William Byrd II of Westover on the James River in Virginia offers an evocative evaluation of a portrait of his friend John Perceval, Lord Egmont. Byrd had the largest collection of paintings in Virginia at that time, including a portrait of Perceval.¹¹
Byrd’s correspondence not only reveals his opinions regarding a good likeness, but also underscores one of the primary functions of portraiture in the period; Perceval’s likeness was so good that Byrd was able to substitute it for the living friend who was excluded from intimate conversation by geographic distance. The modern reader hoping to learn of Perceval’s true character must of course consider Byrd’s desire to flatter a man one notch higher than he on the social scale. It is significant, though, that Byrd did not extol the painter’s skill in rendering Perceval’s features, but praised his ability to communicate Perceval’s character. The artist used an intuitive grasp of his subject to supplement the individual’s lineaments with the essence of his spirit or inner being.

Byrd’s own portrait was painted by Sir Godfrey Kneller (see fig. 1) No written assessment by him of his
own likeness has been found, but visual inspection of the portrait shows an idealized image in a classical pose, including toga-like drapery. It is probable that Perceval’s portrait possessed similar idealization and classical imagery, as do many surviving portraits of the period. Because it is tempting to use terms such as "idealized" and "classical" to describe kinds of likenesses without questioning the assumptions inherent in such labels, a brief diversion from the evidence of "psyche" in portraiture is necessary. Again, one must explore primary documents to comprehend the eighteenth-century person’s descriptors of the objects under scrutiny.

Reynolds’ Discourses, delivered to the Royal Academy annually from 1769 until 1790, were intended as a statement of policy for the young institution; the lectures are an important record of the artist’s vernacular as well as the goals of his colleagues and students. Instead of the idealism/realism dichotomy familiar to twentieth-century viewers, Reynold’s language directs one to think of the portraits in terms of the universal and the specific; these words echo the culture’s need to classify the natural hierarchy of the universe. He introduces the concept of ideal beauty in portraiture in his first discourse; the importance of the concept is underscored by its embellishment in the next four lectures. After the requisite preliminaries of justifying the need for the new
Royal Academy and astutely praising its sponsor, Reynolds moves quickly to caution the directors "... let us not destroy the scaffold, until we have raised the building."\(^{16}\) His metaphor alludes to the need for art students to properly learn to draw the human figure from life, before attempting to paint the idea of the perfect human form. His admonition that the practice he promotes defies "... the method of education pursued in all the Academies [he] ever visited" reveals that the goal of portraying the ideal (universal) human form, rather than the mimicry of individual forms, was the norm for eighteenth-century students of art. The master complained that the students' drawings [resembled] the model only in the attitude. They [changed] the form according to their vague and uncertain ideas of beauty, and [made] a drawing rather of what they [thought] the figure ought to [have been], than of what it [appeared].\(^{17}\)

Thus, most art students were urged prematurely to paint "ideal beauty" before they had learned rudimentary drawing from life. Reynolds does not say it was wrong for the students to have ideas of beauty--that indeed, is the ultimate goal. He realized that without the foundation of successfully drawing from life, an artist could not attain the goal of idealization. The artist who first learned to copy the figure

... not only [acquired] a habit of exactness and precision, but [was] continually advancing in his knowledge of the human figure; and though he [seemed] to superficial observers to make a slower progress, he [would] be found at last capable of
adding . . . that grace and beauty, which [was] necessary to be given to his more finished works, and which [could] not be got by the moderns, as it was not acquired by the ancients, but by an attentive and well compared study of the human form. 18

The master felt a need to clarify his understanding of a work "finished" with "grace and beauty," for he took it up again in the next several discourses. One begins to see a distinction in the artist's mind between the "abstract" (imbued with grace and beauty) and the "original" (unimproved) form.

This great ideal perfection and beauty are not to be sought in the heavens, but upon the earth. They are about us . . . But the power of discovering what is deformed in nature, or in other words, what is particular and uncommon, can be acquired only by experience; and the whole beauty and grandeur of the art consists . . . in being able to get above all singular forms, local customs, particularities, and details of every kind. All the objects which are exhibited to our view by nature . . . have their blemishes and defects. It must be an eye long used to the contemplation and comparison of these forms; and which, by a long habit of observing what any set of objects of the same kind have in common, has acquired the power of discerning what each wants in particular. This . . . comparison should be the first study of the painter, who aims at the greatest style. By this means, he acquires a just idea of beautiful forms; he corrects nature by herself, her imperfect state by her more perfect. His eye being enabled to distinguish the accidental deficiencies, excrescences, and deformities of things, from their general figures, he makes out an abstract idea of their forms more perfect than any one original; and what may seem a paradox, he learns to design naturally by drawing his figures unlike to any one object. This idea of the perfect state of nature, which the Artist calls the Ideal Beauty, is the great leading principle by which works of genius are conducted. 19
Reynolds thus informs the present-day student that her belief system valuing individuality and the unique is not a valid system for judging eighteenth-century portraits. A desire to know what William Byrd II (fig. 1) "really looked like," down to the mole he might have had on his nose or the smallpox scars he might have endured, is not to be fulfilled by his portrait; the portrait of Byrd painted by Kneller in the "Great Style" favored by Reynolds’ academy glossed over any such imperfections or "peculiarities of an individual model." It was the artist’s goal to "get above" the "particular and uncommon" in favor of the "general figures" which combined to create an "abstract idea . . . more perfect than any one original." The theme of the general rather than the specific appears throughout the discourses. From the fourth lecture we learn ". . . in portraits, the grace, and, . . . the likeness, consists more in taking the general air, than in observing the exact similitude of every feature," and 

. . . if a portrait-painter is desirous to raise and improve his subject, he . . . [approaches] it to a general idea. He leaves out all the minute breaks and peculiarities in the face, and changes the dress from a temporary fashion to one more permanent. . . but if an exact resemblance of an individual be considered as the sole object to be aimed at, the portrait-painter will be apt to lose more than he gains by the acquired dignity taken from general nature.

Reynolds applies the conflict between the general and specific not only to physical aspects of the human form, but
also to individuals’ places in the universal scheme of life. By directing the student painter to

... divest himself of all prejudices in favour of his age or country [and] ... disregard all local and temporary ornaments, and look only on those general habits which are everywhere and always the same.33

he reveals the belief that portrait subjects should be lifted out of their specific date and place (evinced by clothing, hair style, and props.) The successful painter should deposit his sitters in the vast continuum of time and space that is the universal and eternal family of humankind. Thus, one often sees costumes in eighteenth-century portraiture not authenticated by surviving costumes of the period; the artist painting in Reynold’s tradition has "classicized" or "idealized" the subject out of his temporal and social setting.

Although painting for eternity was the goal set by Reynolds as president of the Royal Academy, one must acknowledge that many painters fell short of the mark, did not understand the goal, or had their lofty efforts thwarted by the alternate demands of their patrons. Upon examination of eighteenth-century portraits one sees that the vast continuum was often significantly compressed. The limitations and imperfections of both painters and sitters meant that the goal of linking individuals to classical figure types was often remote. One simply does not see Adonis in many of John Wollaston’s paintings of Virginia
Using Greenblatt’s model one sees that Kneller’s insistence on the merits of likenesses emphasizing the general, rather than the specific, established one "authority" for self-fashioning. As president of the Royal Academy, he was by definition representing the establishment’s authority view. Other eighteenth-century literary sources support Kneller’s standard. Poems about art are rich supplements to the visual record of artists’ intentions. In them classical allusions are combined with warnings to be true to nature, asserting that a good portrait captures not only the physical aspects of the subject, but also communicates something of the sitter’s inner being. "Nature" is another word that the modern reader must try to consider synchronically if she is to fully understand eighteenth-century authors’ and artists’ intentions. As one author explains,

‘Nature’ [is] a word of many meanings in the neoclassic or any age. The Augustans were especially conscious of one meaning: Nature as the universal, permanent, and representative elements in the moral and intellectual experience of men. External nature--the landscape--both as a source of aesthetic pleasure and as an object of scientific inquiry or religious contemplation attracted the attention of Englishmen throughout the 18th century. But Pope’s injunction to the critic, ‘First follow Nature,’ has primarily human nature and human experience in view. Nature is truth in the sense that it includes the permanent, enduring, general truths which have been, are, and will be true for all men, in all times, everywhere. The [eighteenth-century] poet exists not to take us on long voyages to discover the new and unique . . . but to reveal the permanent and
the representative in human experience through what becomes for us an act of recognition. As Pope says of 'true wit' or poetry, it 'gives us back an image of our minds.'

Thus, when John Dryden claims that
to imitate Nature well in whatsoever subject, is the perfection of both [poetry and painting]; and that picture, and that poem, which comes nearest to the resemblance of Nature, is the best

he does not refer to verisimilitude, or representation of a person's physical being in a natural or unimproved state.

Realizing that Dryden speaks of pictures and poems together, and that poetry is metaphorical, not literal, one is reminded that a certain amount of embellishment or deception should be expected in portraits of the period.

Dryden thought the pleasure to be derived from art was based on deception:

. . . the means of this pleasure is by deceit; one imposes on the sight, and the other on the understanding. Fiction is the essence of Poetry, as well as of Painting.

In his ode to Sir Godfrey Kneller Dryden elaborated on this theme of deception, or interpretation, in portraiture:

Such are thy Pictures, Kneller: Such thy Skill, That Nature seems obedient to thy Will: Comes out, and meets thy Pencil in the draught: Lives there, and wants but words to speak her thought. At least thy Pictures look a Voice; and we Imagine sounds, deceiv'd to that degree, We think 'tis somewhat more than just to see.

That is, to create a good likeness "'tis more than just to see" and record the physical being before one's eyes. In the poet's opinion, Kneller was a great portrait painter because he mastered the ability to represent a person's
physical likeness on the canvas, then went beyond that basic rendering to communicate something of the sitter’s thoughts:

Thy Genius gives thee both; where true design,
Postures unforc’d, and lively Colours joyn.
Likeness is ever there; but still the best,
Like proper Thoughts in lofty Language drest.
Where Light to Shades descending, plays, not strives;
Dyes by degrees, and by degrees revives.
Of various parts a perfect whole is wrought;
Thy Pictures think, and we Divine their Thought.29

One can read two different meanings into Dryden’s theme of deception. On one level the poet addresses the skill by which the artist recorded the subject’s likeness; in doing so the artist created by illusion a person where none actually existed. Key phrases, however, direct the reader to a meaning in keeping with Kneller’s bid for that "grace and beauty" which raises the picture "above all singular forms . . . particularities, and details" to achieve an image of "corrected nature." To Dryden "fiction is the essence . . . of painting" and the subjects’ thoughts are embellished--"in lofty language drest." The Oxford English Dictionary reinforces the notion that the artist who is "true to nature" captures "the inherent and innate character or disposition of a person" and "the general inherent character or disposition of mankind."30

Kneller had made a gift of a portrait of William Shakespeare to Dryden, which prompted this ode. Like William Byrd conversing with the portrait of his friend Perceval, Dryden placed the picture of the playwright before him for inspiration:
Shakespear thy Gift, I place before my sight;  
With awe, I ask his Blessing e’re I write;  
With Reverence look on his Majestick Face;  
Proud to be less; but of his Godlike Race.  
His Soul Inspires me, while thy Praise I write.

Like painter and patron, poet Dryden subtly and succinctly fashioned himself into the ranks of the great Chain of Literary Being with just one line: "proud to be less [than Shakespeare] but of his Godlike Race." After a brief diversion with biblical, classical, and renaissance allusions, Dryden returned to the idea of embellished Nature as "Truth" in portraiture:

A graceful truth thy Pencil can Command;  
The fair themselves go mended from thy hand;  
Likeness appears in every Lineament;  
But Likeness in thy Work is Eloquent:  
Though Nature, there, her true resemblance bears,  
A nobler Beauty in thy Piece appears.

Dryden was not the only poet who thought Kneller a master of idealized portraiture. Joseph Addison said of Kneller’s portrait of King George "The magick of thy art calls forth/ His secret soul and hidden worth,/ His probity and mildness shows." Nor was Kneller the only artist immortalized in this way; in the colonies Charles Willson Peale received accolades from anonymous poets in newspapers and via missives attached to his portraits during public exhibition. Regarding Peales’ Nancy Hallam as Imogene in Shakespeare’s Cymbeline (fig. 3) one poet offered:

The Grand Design in Grecian Schools was taught,  
Venetian Colours gave the Pictures Thought.  
In thee, O Peale, both Excellences join,  
Venetian Colours, and the Greek design.
Fig. 3. Nancy Hallam as Imogene in Shakespeare’s Cymbeline, Charles Willson Peale, Annapolis, 1771. The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. Photo by Hans Lorenz.
Clearly, eighteenth-century viewers of these portraits were concerned not only with the physical likeness of the subjects, but also with the noble thoughts of the sitters, both male and female. Because painters, poets, and their patrons held "the Greek design" in high esteem and were expected to understand classical allusions, it is touching to read Peale’s humble assessment of his shortcomings:

[CWP to John Beale Bordley, November 1772]

But Sir how far short of that excellence of some painters . . . I have seen [am I.] My enthusiastic mind forms some idea of it but I have not the execution, have not the ability, or am I a master of drawing--what little I do is by mere imitation of what is before me, perhaps I have a good eye, that is all, and not half the application that I now think is necessary--a good painter of either portrait or history, must be well acquainted with the Greecian and Roman statues to be able to draw them at pleasure by memory, and account for every beauty, must know the original cause of beauty--in all he sees.36

However, his limited exposure to the ancients did not prevent another poet from comparing Peale’s portrait of his wife Rachel37 to the classical heroine Arria38:

When Peale his lovely Arria drew,
Like Rubens erst by love impelled,
Nature, to love and genius true,
Herself the glowing pencil held.

Yes! plastic Nature could, alone,
These warm and speaking features give,
Or else she taught her genuine son
To bid the breathing canvas live.

The Rose’ and Lilly’s mingled dye,
And ev’ry mere external charm,
A while may please the vacant eye,
But can no feeling bosom warm.
Give me, depicted warm from Life
Each soft Emotion of the Mind
Give me the Mother and the Wife
As here in beauteous Arria joined.

A good likeness (one that captured the physical and inner being of a person) was not the only consideration for some subjects in their quest for self-definition in portraiture. While some poems praised the painter's ability to capture the thoughts and feelings of the sitter, another common theme addressed the benefit gained by artists in traveling abroad to see Old Master paintings. It was apparently the cosmopolitan experience of painter Henry Benbridge that resulted in Bushrod Washington's commission of a portrait (fig. 4). Stephen Patrick's discovery of a letter from Washington to his mother provides insight into one eighteenth-century mind and the thought process involved in selecting a portrait painter. Two months before the advent of his twenty-first birthday in 1783 Washington wrote, "I have at length determined to have my picture taken, even before I am able to pay for it." The two artists he considered for the task were Charles Willson Peale and Henry Benbridge.

I discovered in Peale's paintings the most striking likenesses--In Benbridges' the most elegant and superior Drapery--Whether I should prefer the first of these qualities or the last in a picture, I was not long in determining, since the principal end is to give an absent friend, or posterity, and idea of a face which they had never seen, or if the likeness then is a bad one, the most perfect drapery will not stamp its value, any more than a Continental Bill which bears on its face the type of thousand.
Fig. 4. Bushrod Washington, Henry Benbridge, Philadelphia, 1783. The Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association of the Union. Photo courtesy of MVLAU.
It is curious in view of his insistence on a good likeness that he finally chose Benbridge rather than Peale to paint his picture. As Washington goes on to explain in the letter, he took the advice of an admired friend, Samuel Powell of Philadelphia before making his final decision.

I was at once relieved from my suspense, by the advice of Mr. Powell, whose judgment in paintings I was well convinced of--His reasons were for Mr. Benbridge [who] was entitled to claim the superiority over any other man in America--To a strong Genius, he has added every improvement which . . . study and travelling could procure--He has seen all the finest paintings and his taste could not fail of being highly improved--Besides he has paints brought with him from Italy, which Peale cannot procure. . . . I am happy to assure you that the best performance has fully justified the measure--The likeness is so striking that Persons who have never seen me more than once or twice, have discovered immediately the resemblance--I think I can see it myself and that is not very easy--I am sure at least that Peale could not have taken a stronger.43

Thus, Bushrod Washington became convinced that Benbridge’s natural abilities, combined with his exposure to great Italian paintings and his possession of the best tools available to his trade, would allow him to create a more "universal" portrait than could Peale.

Portraits of Bushrod Washington’s uncle George Washington raise the discussion of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century concepts of likeness to yet another level. A man like Washington, a national hero, was even more likely than the average citizen to be idealized in portraiture. From surviving oil-on-canvas pictures of America’s first president, it is difficult to know with
certainty what Washington the man, the individual, actually looked like. Those uninitiated to artistic practices of the period would say without hesitation that Washington looked like the image created by Gilbert Stuart in the "Athenaeum" portrait (see fig. 5) because that is the icon most recognized from textbooks, school rooms, and one-dollar bills. But Stuart painted Washington in several different poses and canvas sizes, each one showing Washington’s face a little differently. Stuart himself admitted difficulty in achieving a satisfying likeness of Washington because of the president’s new ivory false teeth, which were too large and distorted the shape of his mouth. For that reason Stuart believed the truest likeness of Washington to be the sculpted bust by Houdon. To further complicate the issue, each artist in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who made his living painting copies of Stuart’s famous portraits diluted the image a bit more each time. By the time the president’s visage was translated into print form, it often bore no resemblance at all to the Stuart portraits (see figs. 6 and 7).

The evidence considered thus far strongly suggests the dominant eighteenth-century Anglo-American definition of "likeness" was that of "idealized," "generalized" or "embellished" nature. Using Greenblatt’s conditions for self-fashioning it is apparent that one "authority" for these sitters was the classical concept of idealized nature.
While the painters of sitters like William Byrd, Nancy Hallam, Bushrod Washington, and George Washington placed them in the general spectrum, the evidence also shows that some sitters preferred to have the specifics of their visages recorded by the painter's pencils.

One sitter's authority could be another's alien. People having portraits painted had choices. As an important political figure, Oliver Cromwell was not at the mercy of second-rate painters for his likeness. He made a conscious choice not to accept the academic artist's goals for a successful likeness. An oft-quoted speech of Cromwell's was prompted by the prospect of having his likeness taken (see fig. 8). He directed miniaturist Samuel Cooper in 1650 to

> ... use all your skill to paint my picture truly like me, and not flatter me at all; but remark all these roughnesses, pimples, warts, and everything as you see me, otherwise I will never pay a farthing for it.\textsuperscript{46}

His instructions were opposed to Dryden's conviction that

> the painter [should] not take that side of the face which has some notorious blemish in it; but either draw it in profile . . . or else shadow the more imperfect side. For an ingenious flattery is to be allowed . . . so long as the likeness is not destroyed.\textsuperscript{47}

These opposite approaches to taking likenesses can be found within the work of a single artist such as Kneller. His portrait of John Locke (fig. 2) is contemporary with his portrait of William Byrd (fig. 1), but they are several degrees apart on the general-to-specific scale of likeness.
Fig. 8. Oliver Cromwell, miniature portrait, Samuel Cooper, London, c.1650. Illustration from John Adair, By the Sword Divided.
Whereas Byrd’s portrait shows a face free of blemishes, wrinkles or even whiskers, the portrait of Locke records a visage marked by wrinkles and the expected dark shadows of a clean-shaven face. Throughout the eighteenth century one sees this dichotomy. Reynolds claimed

... If a portrait-painter is desirous to raise and improve his subject, he has no other means than by approaching it to a general idea. He leaves out all the minute breaks and peculiarities in the face ... But if an exact resemblance of an individual be considered as the sole object to be aimed at, the portrait-painter will be apt to lose more than he gains by the acquired dignity taken from general nature. It is very difficult to ennoble the character of a countenance but at the expense of the likeness, which is what is most generally required by such as sit to the painter.  

Fellow artist Richardson agreed, stating "a portrait-painter must understand mankind, and enter into their characters, and express their minds as well as their faces." The opposite belief was expressed by Roger De Piles that a portrait (particularly one of an accomplished, famous person) should be factual:

... in the faces of heroes, and men of rank, distinguished either by dignities, virtues, or great qualities, we cannot be too exact, whether the parts be beautiful or not: for portraits of such persons are to be standing monuments to posterity; in which case, everything in a picture is precious that is faithful.

Still, De Piles bowed to the dominant cultural authority that valued idealized nature by concluding "but whatever manner the painter acquits himself in this point, let him never forget good air nor grace, and that there are, in the
natural, advantageous moments for hitting them off."

Thus, the eighteenth-century dichotomies of thought regarding likeness in portraiture were not mutually exclusive, but coexisted in a myriad of possible combinations on a broad scale of self-definition.

The debate took root across the Atlantic and continued throughout the century, as seen in the work of Ralph Earl. No written statements have been found by artist Ralph Earl regarding his beliefs on the issue of likeness, but an overview of his portraits reveals that he painted both general and specific likenesses, apparently fashioning his sitters as they requested. Earl "improved" nature in his portraits of English aristocrats and New York socialites, but provided plain, more specific likenesses for his patrons in Connecticut (figs. 9 and 10.) This change in style was not a matter of the artist's "better" training in England; many of the Connecticut paintings were done after his return from abroad. It is probable that Earl responded to some of his American patrons' desires for plain, "republican" (not aristocratic) portraits after the Revolution. Charles Willson Peale set the example for painting with "truthful 'stylelessness' and severity in his portraits of worthy persons [based on a] moral imperative." Peale's intent in painting portraits of revolutionary heroes and leaders of the new republic was "to instruct the mind and sow the seeds of Virtue" for the preservation of the new democracy.
Fig. 9. *A Gentleman with a Gun and Two Dogs*, Ralph Earl, England, 1784. The Worcester Art Museum. Illustration from Elizabeth M. Kornhauser, *Ralph Earl: the Face of the Young Republic*. 
Fig. 10. Colonel Samuel Talcott, Ralph Earl, Connecticut, c.1791-92. The Wadsworth Atheneum. Illustration from Kornhauser.
The addition of severe republican values in the late eighteenth century complicates the twentieth-century viewer's understanding of "likeness," but the academic prejudice for idealized likenesses maintained its dominance nonetheless. Although Peale aimed "to create portraits that appeared to be direct reproductions of external nature, so that character seemed to be 'truthfully' displayed in the features themselves," his belief that his subjects were themselves ideal human specimens confirms the culture's value of universal, idealized portraits.

Thus, Greenblatt's dichotomy of authority/alien is seen in the simultaneous comparison-definition of universal versus specific in eighteenth-century portraits. To the sitter preferring the authority of an improved/universal likeness, the idea of an unimproved/specific likeness was alien. Conversely, the sitter preferring the authority of the latter portrait type for self-definition found the former portrait type to be alien. The mere existence of the authority and alien dichotomy does not fully explain the process of self-fashioning displayed in portraiture; application of Greenblatt's conditions to the iconography of eighteenth-century portraits will reveal a complex cultural belief system manifested in the canvases.
CHAPTER II

METHOD, PROPORTION, AND GEOMETRY

My advice in a word is this: keep your principal attention fixed upon the higher excellencies. If you compass them and compass nothing more, you are still in the first class. We may regret the innumerable beauties which you may want; you may be very imperfect; but still, you are an imperfect artist of the highest order.

Everything which is wrought with certainty, is wrought upon some principle.

Sir Joshua Reynolds

Classical symbolism is not surprising in portraits of those who believed "the grand design in Grecian schools was taught." Art historians seeking precedents for poses and costumes in eighteenth-century portraits have traced them to ancient sculptures such as the Apollo Belvedere and Augustus Caesar. Statuary, columns, and architectural elements painted in the backgrounds are described as classical allusions. A recent, thoughtful analysis of the periodic ebb and flow of the classical fashion in eighteenth-century portraiture is offered by Desmond Shawe-Taylor. Shawe-Taylor's tracking of classicism across time and gender in the eighteenth-century is thought-provoking, as is his acknowledgment of the sitters' desires to role-play in their quest for self-definition. The author's examples of
Reynolds', Gainsborough's, and Cotes' sitters role-playing as the classical characters of Venus, Diana, Aurora, and Apollo easily fit Greenblatt's conditions for self-fashioning and Reynolds' stated goal of "painting for eternity." Unfortunately, these observations of stylistic ancestry do little to enlighten the present viewer regarding the painters' and sitters' reasons for choosing a classical vocabulary. Why did they not select a medieval, romanesque, or oriental mode of expression?

To get to the root of the issue, one must look beneath the painted images to examine them literally from the "ground" layer up. An undervalued indicator of the importance of classicism to the eighteenth-century Anglo-American is the size and shape of the portrait canvases. Scholars have recognized (usually for means of description only) that the canvases are standard sizes, occasionally noting that some of the canvases are classically proportioned. A thorough study of the measurements of all existing eighteenth-century portraits would reveal exceptions to the rule, but the vast majority of the portraits are of the following sizes: 30" x 25" for a "bust length," 36" x 28" for a "Kit-cat" size showing one or two hands, 50" x 40" for a "half-length," and 90" x 60" for a full-length "state" portrait (figs. 11a-d.)

A full awareness of the existence of these standard canvas sizes is vital to understanding the visual system of
Fig. 11a. The Reverend James Blair. J. Hargraves, England, 1705. The College of William and Mary. Photo courtesy of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.
Fig. 11b. Elizabeth Dandridge, John Wollaston, Virginia, c.1755-58. The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. Photo by Hans Lorenz.
Fig. 11c. Frances Tasker (Mrs. Robert) Carter, John Wollaston, Virginia, c.1755-58. The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. Photo by Hans Lorenz.
Fig. 11d. King George II, John Shackelton, London, c.1750. The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. Photo by Hans Lorenz.
self-fashioning evinced by the portraits. The size and shape of the canvases are clues to the boundaries of decorum and the outer limits of self-definition; these boundaries of behavior address the hierarchical structure of eighteenth-century Anglo-American society. Before one assigns symbolic meaning to the physical construction of the canvases, any possible practical explanations should be considered.

Although the physical evidence argues that portraits were made in standard sizes in the period, the making of strainers and cutting of canvases appears to be either a well-kept trade secret or a fundamental cultural practice that needed no verbal or written explication. Even Mansfield Talley, compiler of the most comprehensive collection of period technical literature I have found, offers no actual descriptions of the process painters used to measure, shape, cut, stretch, and tack the canvas to the strainer. Talley does cite illustrations of the seventeenth-century Dutch practice of lacing the canvas to a provisional stretcher "while it was in the studio,"\(^{10}\) (fig. 12) but found none describing the next step of fastening the finished picture to its permanent strainer. He does explain that by the eighteenth century tacks were used "before the picture was begun rather than after its completion."\(^{11}\) Johann Zoffany's painting of A Young Boy Looking at Portraits of His Parents\(^{12}\) (fig. 13) is one of several showing a stretched and tacked canvas on the artist's easel.
Fig. 13. A Boy Looking at Portraits of His Parents, Johann Zoffany, England, c.1750-60. Illustration from Sotheby’s London catalog, November 15, 1989.
One who had never made a strainer or stretched a canvas would have many questions regarding the methods used to cut, shape, and join the wooden strainer elements, the type of canvas to use, and the method of stretching the canvas evenly to the wooden strainer, but descriptions of these procedures have not been found by this author. Apparently all artists simply understood the "correct" shapes and sizes to make portrait canvases.

The student too narrowly focused on the existence of standard canvas sizes might conclude that stretchers and canvases were available to artists ready-made. Although "colourmen" (suppliers of art trade goods) did sell pre-primed and stretched canvases, many artists chose not to use them, as the priming was of poor quality, causing conservation problems later. Physical inspection of strainers reveals different types of corner assembly and member widths, suggesting that artists relied on varied sources and methods of construction. Further, if canvas were made in standard widths for paintings, one would expect to see selvedge edges on two sides of a portrait (or at least on one side if the canvas were folded on the bolt). Physical inspection does not support that theory either. The width of a large piece of canvas may have affected the number (and by implication, the size) of canvases to be cut from it, but artists' treatises and general encyclopedia of the period discuss neither the manufacture of canvas for
painting nor the method for measuring and cutting it to the desired portrait size.\textsuperscript{14}

The technical literature skips over these first essential steps for creating a portrait, but goes into great detail regarding various methods for sizing and priming the canvas. An even greater portion of the literature is given over to the creation, storage, and use of pigments. Even Charles Willson Peale, who left extremely detailed documentation on his methods for sizing and priming the canvas before painting, as well as his methods for mixing and experimenting with colors, failed to write down his method for measuring, cutting, and stretching canvases. Peale did make note of the cost of "cloaths" and "canvis" in his accounts, including an intriguing reference to "one pice of prepaired Canvis about 4 yds. and [some] 2 pieces Stretched, [and] sundry Stretching frames."\textsuperscript{15} The "25 Yds. Linnen"\textsuperscript{16} he purchased in 1767 may or may not have been used for painting canvases, since all other references are to "cloths" or "canvas."

A letter from Peale to fellow artist Robert Fulton confirms that canvas was purchased whole and cut to the desired size. Advising Fulton that he (Peale) had bought up all the canvas he could find in town, he explained "[by] avoiding those cracks you may get several canvases of the size you want, for it contains 3 yards of 4 feet width."\textsuperscript{17} Perhaps the "cracks" Peale mentioned were folds in the
canvas as it came off the bolt, or the word may imply that the purchased canvas had already been "prepaired" or sized with glue and primed. From fabric of those dimensions one could cut one full-length, or two half-length, or two Kit-cat plus one bust-length, or three bust-length portraits. Curiously, any of those arrangements would leave fabric scraps left over, which was undesirable to the eighteenth-century mind. Apparently, the system of standard portrait sizes was more important than the need to economize with the fabric.

Further evidence that artists stretched their own canvases is found in Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Vicar of Wakefield*, written in England in 1766. The rich passage describing the folly of the Vicar’s attempt to improve his family’s social status with a grand "historical" portrait is highly satirical, but the author’s casual description of the artist’s process seems valid:

The piece was large . . . [and] we were all perfectly satisfied with [the artist’s] performance; but an unfortunate circumstance had not occurred till the picture was finished, which now struck us with dismay. It was so very large that we had no place in the house to fix it . . . Instead . . . of gratifying our vanity, as we hoped, there it leaned, in a most mortifying manner, against the kitchen wall where the canvas was stretched and painted, much too large to be got through any of the doors, and the jest of all our neighbours.

It is clear that a standard existed for portrait sizes, and equally clear that many artists stretched their own canvases--how the artists learned the process for
proportioning the canvases remains obscure. Perhaps by the eighteenth century artists merely accepted the "conventional" sizes and shapes used by their ancestors, and the standard was part of the culture's unconscious behavioral template. The artists may have protected the knowledge as one of the "mysteries" of their trade, to be revealed only verbally to apprentices. It is also possible that books instructing the artist on the method for measuring, cutting, and stretching canvases were "used up," as E. H. Gombrich explains about drawing books:

The Catalogue of Books and Pamphlets in the National Art Library at South Kensington, which came out in 1888, lists over five hundred titles of [drawing] books . . . and yet this list is incomplete. It is no mere paradox to say that the scarcity of these books in our libraries is symptomatic of their past importance. They were simply used up, handled and torn in the workshops and studios, and even the existing ones are often misbound and incomplete. 21

Perhaps the method for measuring and stretching a canvas was recorded in manuals that simply got "used up." Whether conscious or unconscious, the standard canvas sizes were valued enough to be perpetuated. In an age that valued hierarchy, order, and the systematic nature of God's universe, it seems unlikely that the artists had no clue to the reasons for these standards. As Sir Joshua Reynolds advised his students, "everything which is wrought with certainty is wrought upon some principle." 22

The principle at work in at least three of the four standard canvas shapes was known to the ancient Greeks. The
Greek words for the system translate into English as "dynamic symmetry," or "commensurability in square." As rediscovered by Jay Hambidge in the twentieth century, the ancients employed this system in architectural and practical design. (The Greeks most certainly used the system in their portable paintings as well, but no paintings survive for our analysis.)

Hambidge explains that

in dynamic symmetry we have a law of pattern making capable of infinite variation and adaptable to every conceivable need of all art, as far as proportion is concerned. The problem of application is most simple as the artist may confine himself to but one rectangle all his life, because its logical subdivisions and expansions in terms of itself are infinite and encompass all the possibilities of every other rectangle of the system.

Dynamic symmetry is based on Pythagorean Theory and the concept that the diagonal of a square can be used to create root rectangles, valued by the ancients in part because they are all based on the square, or in solid form, the cube. (See appendix C for a graphic explanation of root rectangles.) As will be explored further in a discussion of the portraits' iconography "it was held in ancient times that the cube was the source of all number and form." An understanding that "incommensurable" means literally "unmeasurable" reveals the other important characteristic of dynamic symmetry. The diagonal of a square is an example of a line that cannot be measured because its length equals an irrational number (a never ending fraction). The key to
dynamic symmetry is to understand that such lines can be used to create root rectangles, which define geometric areas (see appendix C.)

The term [dynamic symmetry] was used to describe the lines which constitute the sides of rectangles bearing a square-root relationship with their ends. These side and end lines are incommensurable (asymmetrical), but the squares on them are commensurable (symmetrical).27

(Again, the drawings in appendix C make clear what prose tends to render unintelligible.)

Hambidge notes that ". . . the discovery of incommensurables by the early Greeks caused a geometrical scandal which threatened to upset a very profound explanation of the construction of the universe."28

A leading characteristic of dynamic symmetry . . . is that the lines bounding its areas are nearly always incommensurable. It is this curious fact which is responsible for the deferred rediscovery of the Greek method of introducing harmony into design. . . When modern investigators first measured Greek buildings they were embarrassed to find that the line lengths they obtained were really unmeasurable. They were confused because they knew workmen could not carry out building or craft operations with such measurements. . . If we substitute commensurability of area for that of line the age-old mystery is solved. Unmeasurableness of line but measurableness of area are the hall marks of dynamic symmetry.29

The Greek architect presumably drew his plan on paper with compass and straight-edge, using the special properties of root rectangles to create an harmonic design. The builders needed no measuring devices to carry out his plan; pegs and strings used like a huge compass told them where to build.
The system makes obvious sense for the creation of something as large and complex as a building, but its merits for something as relatively small and simple as a two-dimensional portrait are more obscure. The system’s relevance to portraiture is in composition; it creates more interesting compositional shapes. Hambidge explains the importance of root rectangles in composition as follows:

dynamic symmetry is a system of notation in areas and, like the natural notation of numbers, a series or scheme adaptable to any particular purpose may be selected. The advantage of this particular area notation lies in the fact that it introduces asymmetric balance and thus avoids the dead commonplaceness of equal units of area, a curse of pictorial composition for ages.30

The incommensurable aspect of root rectangles makes them "dynamic," or non-static. Pairing the words "dynamic" and "symmetry" creates a conundrum, for a shape that is dynamically symmetrical is "asymmetric" to our modern way of thinking.31 Just as it was a misconception to think of a "good likeness" as a mirror-like image, it is likewise a mistake to think of symmetry as a condition of reflective, mirror-like balance. In the eighteenth century Samuel Johnson defined "symmetry" as the "adaptation of parts to each other; proportion; harmony; agreement of one part to another."32 Sir Joshua Reynolds explained

There is . . . a kind of symmetry, or proportion, which may properly be said to belong to deformity. A figure lean or corpulent, tall or short, though deviating from beauty, may still have a certain union of the various parts, which may contribute to make them on the whole not unpleasing.33
Because root rectangles are all based on the square, they possess that "certain union of the various parts."

In an early analysis of the standard canvas shapes, this "reformed compass cruncher" was at first disappointed when trying to apply the concept of dynamic symmetry to the pictures' outer dimensions; the ratios of height to width for the standard canvas sizes did not match the numerical ratios of the root rectangles. However, reading about a geometric system can be as unrewarding as reading about a musical composition; much is lost in the translation. For this reason one would err in concluding that the mathematical and geometric principles of dynamic symmetry were too complex for Greek artisans or eighteenth-century painters to understand. As Hambidge explains, "it is a mistake to assume that a geometrical construction is abstruse because it is possible to describe it in abstruse language." Continued study of the compositional system, which included active drawing of the root rectangles with a compass on paper, revealed that dynamic symmetry was indeed used by eighteenth-century painters--within the canvas shapes; the root rectangle ratios do not define the canvas perimeters, but address visual divisions within the canvas shapes.

The system is as follows (see figures 14-16): a 30" x 25" bust-length canvas is composed of double squares (or \(\sqrt{4}\) rectangles--pronounced "root 4") and \(\sqrt{2}\) rectangles.
Fig. 14. A schematic bust-length portrait with dynamic symmetry overlay by the author.
Fig. 15. A schematic half-length portrait with dynamic symmetry overlay by the author.
Fig. 16. A schematic full-length portrait with dynamic symmetry overlay by the author.
Depending on how this area is visualized, one sees either four overlapping $\sqrt{2}$ rectangles or a double square (which is also a $\sqrt{4}$ rectangle) and two $\sqrt{2}$ rectangles. All of the canvas shapes utilize double squares in some manner, which is highly appropriate as double squares are both static and dynamic (2:1::$\sqrt{4}$:1).

In a 50" x 40" "half-length" portrait one sees the dynamic grouping of four double squares (or four $\sqrt{4}$ rectangles); the large pairs at top and bottom, the small pairs filling the space in the middle. The compositional appeal of this practice cannot be overstated: a square canvas would be visually static; paradoxically any "leftover" space in a rectangular canvas not in some way related to the square would be either visually lost or obtrusive.

In the same manner a full-length 90" x 60" portrait consists of three double squares or three $\sqrt{4}$ rectangles. Because the ancients related their mystical geometric systems to the human form the appeal of this design is especially noticeable, as the composition divides the standing figure into thirds: head and shoulders, torso, and legs.

Thus, one sees a system at work unifying three of the standard eighteenth-century canvas shapes into compositions of squares, $\sqrt{4}$, and $\sqrt{2}$ rectangles. The key to recognizing the value of such a system comes from understanding its root
(pun intended) in proportion of areas, not in quantitative linear measurement. The painter using this system of dynamic symmetry needed no measuring device; a straight edge and compass\(^3_6\) (with a T-square perhaps) were all the tools required to map out a canvas. Period illustrations support this assortment of tools (figs. 17a-b.)\(^3_7\)

The phrase "map out" in the previous paragraph is significant and will be considered in an iconographical analysis of the portraits, but first the other reportedly "non-classical"\(^3_8\) eighteenth-century canvas size merits a discussion. The 36" x 28" canvas was first used in England by Sir Godfrey Kneller for his series of portraits of "Kit-cat"\(^3_9\) club members painted between 1697 and 1721. A later example of this format is *Elizabeth Dandridge*, painted by John Wollaston in Virginia, c. 1755-57 (fig. 11b). Scholars have been puzzled by this format because the 9:7 shape does not reduce into a simple proportion as do the other canvas forms (6:5, 5:4, 3:2)\(^4_0\). When testing to see if the shape fits the dynamic symmetry system, it was disappointing to see that it comes *very* close to being a two-double-cube-plus-two-\(\sqrt{3}\)-rectangles composition. It is also very close to being a composition of three \(\sqrt{5}\) rectangles stacked horizontally. Such a use of the \(\sqrt{5}\) or "golden section" rectangle would have been highly appropriate for portraits of the learned men of the Kit-cat club, as the \(\sqrt{5}\) rectangle is of special merit in the series.\(^4_1\)
Fig. 17a. Drawing instruments from Denis Diderot, Recueil de Planches, sur les Sciences, les Arts Libéraux, et les Arts Mechaniques, avec leur Explication (1751-72).
Fig. 17b. Painting equipment, Diderot.
That the Kit-cat format does not possess dynamic symmetry suggests the eighteenth-century painters may have been perpetuating a system they did not fully understand. That is, if Kneller understood the other standard canvas shapes as possessing dynamic symmetry, he probably would have utilized the infinite variety of the system to his advantage. Kneller’s inspiration for the Kit-Kat size most likely came from portraits of the same size painted by Rembrandt. This is plausible as Rembrandt was Kneller’s teacher. Rembrandt copied the size from Raphael’s Baldasare Castiglione, c.1515, which he saw at auction in 1640 (fig. 18). Art historians speculated that Jacob Tonson, secretary of the Kit-cat club and commissioner of the portraits, requested the new size to fit a particular space in his house. As David Piper explains, this appears not to have been the case:

Some early nineteenth-century authorities state that Jacob [Tonson the first] built a special room, but the only contemporary statement is that by his nephew Jacob II concerning the room that he had built. The 1735 will of Jacob Tonson II states, "Whereas I have lately at some Expence Erected an Edifice or Building at Barnes wherein the said collection of the Kit-Cat pictures are now placed . . .," which offers no evidence of the first owner’s specifications for canvas size.

Of particular interest to this study is the fact that Baldasare Castiglione was at some point cut down along the
Fig. 18. Baldasare Castiglione, Raphael, 1515. Illustration from Max von Imdahl, "Raffaels Castiglionebildnis im Louvre zur Frage Seiner Urspringlichen Bildgestalt," Pantheon, 1962.
lower edge. The portrait as it exists today measures 32 1/4" x 26 1/2". From period copies it is known that the original painting completely showed the subject’s hands, but a succession of "restorations" and conflicting period copies have prevented scholars from ascertaining the original dimensions. Raphael may have created Baldasare Castiglione with dynamic symmetry, but we will not know until further evidence is discovered.

It is apparent that dynamic symmetry was used either actively or passively by eighteenth-century artists when creating portraits. Claude Bragdon, architect and follower of Hambidge, has found dynamic symmetry at work in compositions by nineteenth and twentieth-century artists who knew nothing of the principle, which would seem on first consideration to discredit the whole design concept. Bragdon claims just the opposite, that such a discovery confirms the idea:

I interpret it as meaning that the aesthetic intuition works mathematically, and achieves, by its own subterranean processes, and without the aid of calculation, the desired results. The question then naturally arises: why have rules, and what gain is there in knowing them? To this there is an effective answer suggested by the sister art of music. The natural-born composer will intuitively obey the great generic laws which are at the root of music but he cannot on that account afford to dispense with their formulation as embodied in the science of harmony, because, lacking this knowledge, he would do a great deal of unnecessary fumbling about, and he would fall short of his highest potentiality of self-expression.
If the system was still actively applied (that is if the painters went through the motions of drawing root rectangles to determine the standard canvas shapes rather than relying on established measurements as a short cut), then further research is needed to determine the precise method used by the artist in "compassing" his canvas. Working backward from a known canvas shape to determine the root rectangle areas within it is not the same as starting with a blank piece of cloth; how the painter determined the length of the initial side of the base square remains unclear. A canvas of the same proportions could be made from variously sized squares, resulting in paintings of different sizes, but we see canvases not only of the same proportions, but also of the same sizes. It is possible that one of the painter’s tools was a standard length, used to demarcate the base square. Perhaps the t-square or maulstick seen in illustrations of artists’ tools doubled as a measuring rod, or the compass opened to a predetermined width to mark off the base square. These scenarios are all possible, but if the painter began with a base square, the length of that square would be different for each of the standard portrait sizes, calling for at least three different benchmark tools, or one tool with three benchmarks on it. More research is required to unravel this perpetuation not only of proportions, but of portrait sizes as well.
The configuration of the portrait rectangle in figure 19a is only one possible arrangement of root rectangles, which may not be the way the painter would have envisioned it. An alternate assemblage that works just as well is shown in figure 19b. This arrangement is more satisfying when one thinks of the oval windows placed around some sitters like Reverend Blair (fig. 11a), painted by J. Hargraves in England in 1705. However, the curve of the arcs in the portrait and in the diagram is not quite the same. Figure 19c shows the most satisfying configuration. The same squares and $\sqrt{2}$ rectangles are used, but the principle of the $\sqrt{5}$, or "Golden Section" rectangle, is used to delineate the arcs. (The $\sqrt{5}$ rectangle is created by taking the diagonal of half a square--see appendix C.) In this final arrangement of squares and $\sqrt{2}$ rectangles a connection is made between the practical geometric proportioning of the canvas and the use of an oval window around the portrait subject. The use of an oval window around the sitter reveals important moral and spiritual symbolism and warrants further discussion, but the cultural significance of the system of dynamic symmetry deserves primary explication.

The system of root rectangles is one way that human beings sought to use mathematic and geometric principles to understand the universe and their place in it. It was used to design and construct ancient temples--spiritual sites.
Fig. 19a. One application of dynamic symmetry in the bust-length canvas.
Fig. 19b. Alternate application of dynamic symmetry in the bust-length canvas.
Fig. 19c. Dynamic symmetry in the bust-length canvas using the "diagonal to half a square" to demarcate an oval "window."
That this architectural design system was also used to define the shapes of portraits substantiates the human need to define boundaries. Eighteenth-century portraits are evidence of a fundamental belief: humans are part of an hierarchical system. The person in a portrait is a symbol of a person within a family within a dynasty within a social group within a nation. The portrait in turn is a two-dimensional configuration within a three-dimensional room within a group of rooms within a community of structures.

As twentieth-century architect Claude Bragdon notes "a work of art must portray not only a world-aspect, but the world-order: through and by means of the concrete and particular it should suggest the abstract and the generic—it must be not only typical, but archetypal." Eighteenth-century architect James Gibbs, previously noted for his abilities as a classifier of building parts, understood that "the tang of his own time . . . should flavor everything the architect does, but along with this communication of the immediate, the unique, the special, there should be communicated also some sense of the eternal and the absolute." Design books like James Gibbs' Rules for Drawing the Several Parts of Architecture explain that all parts of a well-designed building should relate to each other in harmonic proportion. Gibbs' designs for windows and doors (fig. 20a) illustrate his use of the compass to define those proportions. Some of the architect’s
Fig. 20a. Designs for windows and doors, James Gibbs, *Rules for Drawing the Several Parts of Architecture*, 1738.
"properly proportioned" room designs are shown in figures 20b.51 A 50 by 40 inch portrait has the same proportions as the 25 by 20 foot room designed by Gibbs. A 90 by 60 inch portrait has the same proportions as his 30 by 20 foot room. A two-dimensional portrait hung in such a room would relate proportionally to the larger two-dimensional surface of the wall behind it, as well as to the height and width of the three-dimensional space created by the boundaries of the floor, ceiling, and walls.

Although the $\sqrt{2}$ and golden section rectangles are noticeably absent from Gibbs' designs, his use of simple geometric symmetry (relying on the square, the square and one-half, the double square, etc.) reveals his concern for the harmonic "relatedness" of all parts of the whole. His designs epitomize the goals of eighteenth-century artists and artisans. Further evidence that even those designers who used the root rectangle principles of dynamic symmetry may have worked from tradition, rather than comprehension, is seen in the architectural designs of Robert Morris. In his Essay in Defence of Ancient Architecture one sees floor plans based on the square, $\sqrt{3}$ and $\sqrt{5}$ (golden section) rectangles52 (fig. 21a). The book does not aim to teach the principles of design, but simply offers plans for builders to copy; the author does not elaborate on why the proportions are correct. Morris's Lectures on Architecture does intend to teach the principles of design, but his
Fig. 20b. Designs for "properly proportioned" rooms, James Gibbs, *Rules for Drawing the Several Parts of Architecture*, 1738.
Plan of the 3 Storeys to the
Ionick Example

(Dynamic symmetry application
by the author.)

Fig. 21a. Floor plans, Robert Morris, *Essay in Defence of
Ancient Architecture*, 1728.
understanding is based on musical proportion, which he uses to concoct elaborate mathematic tables of ideal measurement. The tables in this treatise are meant to be used as a reference tool for gentlemen architects. A third book coauthored by Morris and the Halfpenny brothers offers designs for fireplaces with overmantel paintings. The center painting on plate 67 (fig. 21b) of Modern Builder’s Assistant is the first I have discovered whose perimeter is a \( \sqrt{2} \) rectangle. The wall paintings suggested by Morris on plate 73 (fig. 21c) are the same proportion as a 30" by 25" portrait, thus utilizing double squares and \( \sqrt{2} \) rectangles in their design. Although Morris uses shapes possessing dynamic symmetry in his designs, he may not have understood the principles, because he does not explicate the system for his readers.

The principles of dynamic symmetry do not exist only in academic treatises, as seen from the evidence of portrait canvases. Since this study of dynamic symmetry began with portraits of Williamsburg subjects, the architecture of Williamsburg seems a rich resource to continue the learning process. I am not a student of architecture, and my method of using other scholars’ published scale drawings of the houses to test my theory is imprecise. Nonetheless, there is evidence of root rectangles in the design of Williamsburg’s public and private buildings. Architectural historian Mark R. Wenger explored the geometry of William
Fig. 21b. Designs for fireplaces, William Halfpenny, Modern Builder’s Assistant, 1747.
Fig. 21c. Design for frames and moldings, William Halfpenny, *Modern Builder’s Assistant*, 1747.
Byrd's Westover and other related buildings in his master's thesis. He noted the possible use of the golden rectangle in Westover's floor plan, and conjectured the use of equilateral triangles in the elevation (fig. 22a-b). I propose that dynamic symmetry was involved in the design of both the floor plan and the elevation (fig. 23a-b). In the floor plan the two west rooms are each square. Working east from those squares, the \( \sqrt{3} \) rectangle defines the far wall of the hall. On the east end of the plan, no wall denotes the base square; understanding unity to be the basis, one then sees that the \( \sqrt{2} \) rectangle defines the east wall of the hall. That is, the floor plan of Westover was conceived as two \( \sqrt{3} \) rectangles connected to two \( \sqrt{2} \) rectangles. On the facade (fig. 23a) the \( \sqrt{3} \) rectangle clearly defines the roof ridgeline. It is troublesome that the square falls slightly above the cornice line, and the root 2 rectangle just misses the tops of the dormers. These discrepancies do not nullify the presence of dynamic symmetry; they merely attest to a margin of error between the architect's design and the builder's product.

More precise examples of root rectangles are found in the elevations of the Archibald Blair and Ludwell Paradise houses (figs. 24a-b). On the Archibald Blair facade the \( \sqrt{2} \) rectangle defines the roof line and the \( \sqrt{3} \) rectangle defines the chimney cap. It was necessary to divide the Ludwell-Paradise facade into three base squares.
Fig. 22a. Equilateral triangles in the facade of Westover, Mark R. Wenger, *Westover: William Byrd's Mansion Reconsidered*. 
Fig. 22b-c. The Golden Section in Westover’s floor plan, Mark R. Wenger, Westover: William Byrd’s Mansion Reconsidered.
Fig. 23. Facade of Westover, Marcus Whiffen, The Eighteenth-Century Houses of Williamsburg, with dynamic symmetry overlay by the author.
Fig. 24a. Facade of the Archibald Blair House (now the Grissell Hay Lodging), Marcus Whiffen, The Eighteenth-Century Houses of Williamsburg, with dynamic symmetry overlay by the author.
Fig. 24b. Facade of the Ludwell-Paradise House, Marcus Whiffen, *The Eighteenth-Century Houses of Williamsburg*, with dynamic symmetry overlay by the author.
to discover dynamic symmetry in its design, where one sees the cornice demarcated by the $\sqrt{2}$ rectangle and the roof line by the $\sqrt{3}$.

The Governor's Palace is a curious puzzle, because it was reconstructed in this century using mainly the extant foundations, period artist's renderings, and Thomas Jefferson's drawings of the floor plan. Using a period illustration of the palace from Colonial Williamsburg's famed Bodleian plate (fig. 25) as a template, it appears that root rectangles were used in its design, but the two different points of perspective used by the engraver cause the overlay to skew a bit. If the perspective were correct, it is likely that the $\sqrt{2}$ rectangle would define the cornice of the dormers, the $\sqrt{3}$ rectangle would define the roof's ridgeline, and so on, up to the top of the cupola. There are buildings in Williamsburg for which the principles of dynamic symmetry do not work—obviously, dynamic symmetry was not used by all designers in the eighteenth century, but does appear to have been broadly understood and applied. Just as we find standard canvas shapes in academic portraits, but not in folk paintings, I suspect dynamic symmetry will be found in some academic buildings, but not in vernacular structures. Colonial Williamsburg's master cabinetmaker and furniture curators know dynamic symmetry was used in furniture design. Further exploration will undoubtedly reveal the system used for the design of other
Fig. 25. The Governor's Palace from a Bodleian Plate restrike, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, with dynamic symmetry overlay by the author.
Discovery of dynamic symmetry employed in the design of eighteenth-century material culture reveals much more than some of the practical concerns of artisans; it uncovers a system by which human beings since ancient times have sought to bring order and unity to their universe. An understanding of who taught the method and which institutions supported the design practice will enrich our knowledge of eighteenth-century culture.
CHAPTER III
ICONOGRAPHY

... in his hand he took the golden compass ... to circumscribe this universe and all created things.¹

John Milton

All the real Pleasures and Conveniencies of Life lie in a narrow Compass.²

The Spectator

An understanding of the geometric and hierarchical ordering of eighteenth-century spaces, both two-dimensional and three-dimensional, leads one to consider the human need to create definitions of self and one’s place in the universe. Greenblatt’s eighth and tenth conditions for self-fashioning explain that once the individual’s station or rank is internalized, an approved set of behaviors is required to reinforce his or her submission to the chosen authority and to protect against the perceived alien force. A clue to the behavioral boundaries utilized by eighteenth-century people in their struggle to balance these opposing forces is found in the painted oval windows in some of their portraits.

Art-historians have accepted these ovals as mere artists’ traditions or spatial devices, but it is difficult to believe that elements so stylized (see The Reverend James Blair, fig. 11a) were intended to create an illusion of perspective. The ovals’ extreme stylization argues for
their descent from the artist’s compass and the principles of dynamic symmetry as presented. If the artists wanted to paint their subjects as if seated behind windows, they had that option, as seen in one of John Wollaston’s best Virginia portraits—Anne Randolph (Harrison). That portrait of the mid-1750s shows a little girl inside a stone edifice with her elbows resting on the window sill. Further, if one accepts the ovals as "shadows" of the geometric arcs used to define the canvas proportions, then one must ask why they were considered important enough to be painted into the final composition.

The arcs remain in the portraits because the concept of using a compass to create perfect proportion in things can also be applied to the desire for perfectly regulated human behavior. The practice of painting a subject in an oval within the rectangular canvas was common in the late seventeenth and early to mid-eighteenth centuries; portraits of the new republic which attempted to memorialize the virtues of the founding fathers revived the practice. Round and oval portrait formats were well-known to eighteenth-century citizens from Renaissance portraiture, which in turn was based on Roman portraiture. The noble concept was carried across the millennia not only through portraiture and architectural details, but in the very coins that people carried in their pockets. That the round or oval frame for human likenesses should represent the
republican virtues of selflessness, benevolence, prudence, reason, and self-discipline is no surprise.\textsuperscript{5} Within that context one understands the emblematic use of the oval format in the many variations of images of George Washington (fig. 26) and other revolutionary heroes.

Related to this evocation of republican virtues, and the eighteenth-century citizen's understanding of those virtues, is the idea of "keeping within the compass." A print in the Colonial Williamsburg collection (fig. 27a) instructs a man literally within the compass that "industry produceth wealth." The circumscribed circle admonishes "keep within compass and you shall be sure, to avoid many troubles which others endure." Within the bounds of acceptable behavior as illustrated behind the man (again, literally within the compass boundary) are scenes of virtue and its consequences. Outside the bounds of the compass in the four corners of the print are scenes of vice and its consequences. Verses below continue the theme of virtue and vice. The companion print (fig. 27b) has similar advice for a woman.

Use of the phrase "keep within compass" in relation to human behavior is traced back as far as the middle ages in the \textit{Oxford English Dictionary}. The earliest uses refer to "equal stepping," probably derived from the "legs" of the compass. In common usage the meaning became one of living with measure and order, keeping moderate space, practicing
Fig. 27a. Keep Within Compass: Industry Produceth Wealth, after Robert Dighton, 1784. The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. Photo by Hans Lorenz.
Fig. 27b. Keep Within Compass: Prudence Produceth Esteem, after Robert Dighton, 1784. The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. Photo by Hans Lorenz.
moderation, and understanding due limits. The Freemasons adopted the compass as one of their order's emblems reminding brothers to "circumscribe desires and keep passions in bounds." A thorough discussion of masonic symbolism is beyond the compass of this study, but the fraternal order's need for secrecy and its ritualistic behavior do evoke Greenblatt's tenth condition for self-fashioning--any organization which seeks to include some people while excluding others is enmeshed in the power struggle between authority and alien forces.

The authority of the compass and the virtues it symbolized were accepted by one London businessman as evinced by his business card. James Ashley's trade card shows a portrait of the punch house proprietor circumscribed in an oval border; the oval is framed by drawings of punch bowls and various decorative elements. On the plinth supporting his portrait are several tools, including a compass. The inscription reads "James Ashley who at the London Punch House on Ludgate Hill 1731 first reduc'd the price of punch and rais'd its reputation." Perhaps the compass merely advertised the club as a masonic watering hole; it is equally plausible that the proprietor chose to capitalize on the virtuous emblem known to masons and the general public alike in order "to raise the reputation" of punch drinking. Presumably the compass reassured the establishment's patrons that they would not be led down the
path to drunkenness and dissipation, but would "keep their desires in bounds."

The metaphor is not only applied to human behavior, but also to God and His Creation. The twenty-fourth psalm begins "The earth is the Lord's, and all that therein is: the compass of the world, and they that dwell therein." In Paradise Lost, Milton ascribes the use of a compass to God in the creation of the universe:

. . .in his hand
He took the golden Compasses, prepar'd
In God's eternal store, to circumscribe
This universe, and all created things:
One foot he center'd, and the other turn'd
Round through the vast profundity obscure,
And said, Thus far extend, thus far thy bounds,
This be thy just circumference, O world."

Without these clues to the moral significance of the compass in eighteenth-century images, it would be tempting to attribute the presence of compasses in paintings like Captain Harding Williams and Virtuosi (figs. 28a-b) to the masculine activities of navigation and architectural design. Those interpretations are well-founded, but such gender-biased judgments could conceal possible alternate meanings of the compass. In Van Dyke's Thomas Howard, Earl of Arundel, with Alethia Countess of Arundel (fig. 29) the woman holds the compass. The painting is also known as The Madagascar Portrait because it documents Lord Arundel's interest in colonizing that region. Although her husband was willing to risk all on the project, Countess Alethia
Fig. 28a. Captain Harding Williams, attributed to Abraham Delanoy, c.1785. Illustration from Christie’s New York sale catalog, October 19, 1991.
Fig. 28b. Virtuosi, circle of John Theodore Heins (1697-1756). Illustration from Christie's London sale catalog, November 15, 1991.
Fig. 29. Thomas Howard, Earl of Arundel, with Alethia Countess of Arundel, Van Dyke, 1639. Illustration from David Howarth, Lord Arundel and His Circle.
was feeling far from adventurous and she managed to dissuade her husband from holding court in a jungle, though only with the greatest difficulty. Before then, however, and while Arundel was still intent upon going, they sat to Van Dyck. In this [image] they seem like directors of a company: Madagascar is the new product which will save the business, and the portrait, the cover to the new prospectus. Lady Arundel, like some elderly Muse of Navigation, holds instruments for the voyage and her husband points to the source of redemption while he studiously avoids the scrutiny of investors.  

The Countess may well have been her husband’s muse, but she may also have been the voice of reason who kept his ambitions within the compass of reasonable expectation. The compass as symbol of moderation, discipline, and good judgment should not be overlooked in favor of more obvious navigational and design implications. 

Figures 30a and b are rare illustrations of the impropriety of stepping out of bounds. The satirical seventeenth-century line engraving shows a man described as "an English antick," his codpiece open tied at the top with a great bunch of riband." Clearly he's not an example to follow, for not only is his placket open but his hat and shoe extend beyond the boundary defined for him by the circumscribed line. He's literally stepped beyond the bounds of appropriate dress. The same concept is depicted in the nineteenth-century illustration of a house guest who overstayed her welcome. She's shown with her umbrella extending through the implied circular boundary. Seeking art-historical precedence for this convention one is
Fig. 30a. "An English antick, his codpiece open tied at the top with a great bunch of riband," 17th-century. Illustration from Esther Aresty, The Best Behavior.
Fig. 30b. "Departing house guest," Rules of Etiquette and Home Culture, 1884. Illustration from Esther Aresty, The Best Behavior.
reminded of Andrea del Castagno’s frescoes painted in the Villa Carducci between 1449 and 1451 (fig. 31). The frescoes depict historical Florentine figures standing in faux architectural niches. Each figure has a foot, elbow, and/or head extending beyond the boundaries of the niche, but unlike the seventeenth and nineteenth-century examples cited above, these figures are the epitome of the Italian Renaissance artist’s fascination with depicting three-dimensional form, movement, and perspective. The Villa Carducci figures appear to be stepping out into the viewer’s space, while the "Antick" and "Houseguest"-like children learning to color--failed to "stay in the lines."

The concepts of correct proportion and correct behavior are intimately related in eighteenth-century portraiture. Oval and rectilinear boundaries in portraits are more than artists’ conventions; they express human beings’ needs to live morally, and to define themselves and their positions within God’s universe. Since time began, humans’ attempts to understand the creation of the universe have relied on mathematic and geometric principles to measure boundaries, delineate the heavens, and navigate the unknown. Most Western measuring systems have placed man at the center of the universe, as the measure of all things. Leonardo da Vinci’s famous drawing Man in a Circle and Square (fig. 32) is widely accepted as the visual translation of Vitruvius’ statement that "a circle inscribed around a man with arms
Fig. 31. The Cumaean Sibyl, Andrea del Castagno, 1449-1451. Illustration from Mauta Horster, Andrea del Castagno.
Fig. 32. Man in a Circle and Square, Leonardo da Vinci, Italy, c.1490. Illustration from Circa 1492, Jay A. Levenson, ed.
and legs outstretched would have its center at his navel. As Samuel Edgerton notes,
in other words, the navel as point of entry for nourishment of the infant in its mother's womb had cosmic significance as center of the form that circumscribed not only man but the whole universe . . . Leonardo modified Vitruvius's unillustrated statement by showing that man's figure in a square had the center not at his navel but at his groin, implying that the male phallus has the same symbolic significance as representing the procreative link between earth and heaven.

Edgerton goes on to explain that Leonardo was familiar with another ancient treatise by Ptolemy which had even more effect on his understanding of human beings' place in the universe.

This was the Geography or Cosmography by the second-century A.D. Alexandrian Greek Claudius Ptolemaeus, or Ptolemy, which contained some twenty-five geographical maps of nations known to the ancients plus a double-page gridded mappamundi or "map of the world," with which the other detail maps were correlated. This abstract grid was fixed to the spherical earth by the same mathematics of longitude and latitude by which the ancient Greeks located the stars in the sky . . . Leonardo owned a printed copy and made frequent references to it in his . . . notebooks. He even promoted the Cosmography . . . as the ideal model for his own intended treatise on human anatomy, as he acknowledged in his preface: "there will be revealed to you in fifteen entire figures the cosmography of this minor mondo [the 'lesser world' of the human body as microcosm of the macrocosm] in the same order as was used by Ptolemy before me in his Cosmographia."

Leonardo was not interested in the geography presented by Ptolemy, which by the fifteenth century was obsolete; he was fascinated with the ancient scholar's organizing system which
coordinated his pictures of the individual lands with their relative positions in the mappamundi. This depended on imagining the globe not as amorphouse topography but as a homogeneous surface ruled by a uniform geometric grid . . . proof positive that the same forces and organizational systems that operated in the world also pertained to human anatomy.17

Sir Joshua Reynolds's eighteenth-century advice on human anatomy explained that ideal beauty in portraiture is achieved by

an eye long used to the contemplation and comparison of these forms; and which, by a long habit of observing what any set of objects of the same kind have in common, has acquired the power of discerning what each wants in particular.18

His words were foreshadowed by Ptolemy's distinction between chorography and geography:

The end of chorography is to deal separately with a part of the whole, as if one were to paint only the eye or ear by itself. The task of geography is to survey the whole in its just proportion, as one would the entire head. For in an entire painting we must first put in the larger features and afterwards those detailed features which portraits and pictures may require, giving them proportion in relation to one another so that their correct distance apart can be seen by examining them, to note whether they form the whole or part of the picture.19

This appreciation of the geometric and hierarchical ordering of the universe and its inhabitants was not exclusive to Renaissance artists and scientists. It was also for a long time much on the minds of Christian theologians . . . Many learned churchmen, like the English Roger Bacon . . . believed that knowledge of geometric systematization would somehow restore Christian unity and make it possible to regain the Holy Land. As Bacon advised: 'since, therefore, the power of geometry is required for the knowledge of every corporeal creature, there is not doubt but
that in an inexpressible manner it is effective for sacred knowledge.\textsuperscript{20}

Because sacred knowledge in the eighteenth century was a curious blend of astrology-based superstition, religious faith, and science, one understands the appeal of geometric design to humans for their artistic creations.

Leonardo belonged to a society that, like every human society anywhere in the world since the dawn of mankind, believed that geometric patterns formed in orthogonal relationships not only pleased the eye aesthetically but possessed talismanic power. Even in the Renaissance and well after, certain geometric figures composed of squares, circles, and triangles linked in some sort of grid pattern were considered "magic" because people thought they contained a clue to the power of God and his master plan of the universe.\textsuperscript{21}

Thus, when eighteenth-century artists "mapped out" their portrait canvases with a compass and the principles of dynamic symmetry, they perpetuated an age-old belief system instigated by humankind’s quest to know God and the meaning of His universe.

By Leonardo's time the cartographic grid had become in its own right a talismanic symbol of Christian authority. Whether applied as the abstract direction system on a map, or the actual direction system of an urban site, or even the compositional system of a picture [emphasis mine], the cartographic grid in the Renaissance was believed to exude moral power, as expressing nothing less than the will of the Almighty.\textsuperscript{22}

If the cartographic grid of longitude and latitude lines possessed "talismanic" powers, then the more advanced principles of dynamic symmetry must have communicated sublime understanding to its proponents. As the tool used
to create these special grids, the compass assumed its own talismanic powers, as seen by its presence in portraits and masonic regalia.

Figure 33 shows the title page of The Christian Zodiac or Twelve Signs of Predestination framed by the triumphal arch of a compass. In figure 34 one sees the circular wheel-grid created by a compass to represent the signs of the zodiac; like Leonardo’s Man in a Circle and Square, the human is depicted as the center of the universe. Because religion and astrology were not clearly demarcated in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries one sees the emblem of the compass in unexpected contexts.

Interest in the concept of a vast, yet highly ordered and logical, chain of being in the universe was not exclusive to ancient Greeks and renaissance Italians. Subjects of the English crown on both sides of the Atlantic kept the idea alive in the eighteenth century. Just as a small group of Williamsburg’s portraits serve as a microcosm of broad Anglo-American portraiture traditions, and Williamsburg’s architecture attests to the widespread use of dynamic symmetry, these ancient cosmic beliefs are evinced by the behavior of Williamsburg’s residents. John Blair, twice acting-governor of Virginia, nephew of the Reverend James Blair, and vestryman for Anglican Bruton Parish Church, kept a diary in an almanac in which he carefully noted the illnesses and deaths of friends and family
Fig. 33. Title page, Father Jeremias Drexel, *The Christian Zodiack or Twelve Signes of Predestination*, 1633. Illustration from Peter M. Daly, ed. *The English Emblem and the Continental Tradition*. 
Fig. 34. "Circular representation of the signs of the Zodiac, corresponding to the year's labours (from a medieval miniature). Illustration from J. E. Cirlot, A Dictionary of Symbols.
according to the movement of the moon and stars. Whether Blair believed that astral bodies affected human lives or was conducting his own "scientific" test of superstitious beliefs cannot be determined from one surviving document, but the continued interest in astrology during the so-called Age of Enlightenment is significant. Another prominent Virginian, Robert Carter of Nomini Hall, owned plantations spread across several counties, which he named for the signs of the zodiac.

The overt importance of boundaries, both metaphysical and material, to eighteenth-century Anglo-Americans was shown annually with the ritual of "Processioning the Bounds." This annual rite was known as early as the ninth century, when the church and laity in England performed a . . . procession in the spring to determine the parish boundary limits and the town's meadows and fields . . . The procession, filled with religious symbolism, wound its way into every part of the parish led by acolytes carrying the crucifer, candles and tapers. The acolytes were followed by choristers, along with the vested priests . . . and the parishioners carrying banners, staves, streamers, and bells. Children were encouraged to take an active role in the procession by "beating the bound stones" with willow switches as a symbolic gesture of proclaiming sacred ground.

Laws were passed throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Virginia dictating when the processioning was to be done and determining fines for vestries who failed to comply.

Anglican mass followed the processioning of Virginia's bounds, which shares much symbolic ritual with ancient Greek...
rituals of sacrifice. As George Hersey explains, the Greek participants gathered at the altar stone after the procession and drew a circle around themselves in the earth. The area enclosed became a sacred precinct. After the animal was sacrificed and offered for communion it was symbolically reconstructed on the altar using its bones and skin. In that way the victim was memorialized, or granted eternal life, in recognition that it had held the god’s soul. The taking of a person’s likeness to be memorialized on canvas may be understood as the same kind of mythically affirming ritual. The subject of a portrait was not only recreated on canvas with pigments, but was also given eternal presence in the lives of his or her descendants, assuming of course that the descendants kept and cared for the portrait over the generations.

Hersey notes that the ancient Greeks built their first temples from sacred trees; indeed, before there were temples, they worshipped in sacred groves. The temples were adorned with the battle gear of slain enemies; even the heads of the hapless losers were mounted over doors to transform their deaths from murders to sacrifices. This practice is confirmed by the survival of gargoyles and masks on Greek and Greek Revival buildings (fig. 35). Although not a pleasant thought to the twentieth-century reader, the trophy-heads of Greek victims adorning a facade are visual links to the ancestral portraits lining the walls of an
Fig. 35. Anthemions with faces, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, McKim, Mead and White, 1906. Illustration from George Hersey, *The Lost Meaning of Classical Architecture*. 
eighteenth-century family manor (fig. 36). Just as the Greek’s trophies affirmed their right to possess the spoils of war, so too did eighteenth-century portraits affirm a family’s right to maintain its inheritable wealth within the dynasty depicted in the paintings.

Because "trees were the first temples," John Gwynn’s 1742 poem "The Art of Architecture" offers special meaning for this study of painted likenesses and the definition of self within the hierarchy of the universe:

The swelling Tree, as it unpolish’d grew
Undecorated, native Graces shew;
From thence the Column, in its purer Dress,
The wreath’d, the fluted, or th’ encumb’ring Vine,
With plenteous Branches round the Pillar twine;
Yet still its pure Simplicity you see;
The Shaft of Art, resembles still a Tree.
But how to appropriate, to embellish still
Justly, the Space to decorate and fill,
To give proportion’d Beauty to each Part,
To make the whole subservient to the Art;
The Inborn-Traces of the Mind pursue,
For Nature teaches how to find the Clue.

With apologies to William Shakespeare, "where I did begin, there shall I end--my study is run its compass." A new understanding of the importance of hierarchy, and self-definition for eighteenth-century people within that hierarchy, led to a consideration of eighteenth-century concepts of likeness. The different modes of representation understood to twentieth-century viewers as "ideal" versus "real" should be understood instead as the polarities of general and specific to the eighteenth-century way of thinking. The different styles in portraits like William
Fig. 36. The Long Gallery, Ham House, Surrey, England, built 1610.
Byrd II and John Locke (figs. 1 and 2) should be understood as two equally acceptable extremes on the eighteenth-century scale of likeness. A person commissioning a portrait sought to classify him or herself within an individual family and within the larger human family; the academic painter attempted to capture a good likeness by generalizing the person out of a specific date and place into the universal continuum of time and space. The finished portrait fit within an architectural heirarchy devised by the laws of mathematics, geometry, and harmonic proportion. This quest for order was as old as mankind; in defining and classifying their world, eighteenth-century people sought to understand and perpetuate their culture's social, political, economic, and religious myths.

My quest to explore the beliefs of a culture that history has placed outside the compass of my direct inspection has led me from the study of artists' methods to the design practices of ancient Greece. Understanding the use of dynamic symmetry to define the portrait shapes reveals the practical, moral, and spiritual implications of the compass in eighteenth-century Anglo-American culture. The compass has been a vital tool for artisans and builders since ancient times; today it has allowed me to expand my circle of knowledge about the cultural beliefs and practices behind the faces in eighteenth-century portraits. The paintings are more than documents of people of the past;
they are evidence of individuals' needs to define themselves within physical, social, and spiritual boundaries. Because painters were bound by the limitations of their abilities and their interpretations of "likeness," they classified their patrons within the hierarchical system of God's universe somewhere between the "universal" and the "specific." The challenge remains to determine the forces prejudicing the precise mix of painters' and patrons' preferences in this puzzling process of self-presentation.
APPENDIX A

Chronological List of Portraits Studied

**Reverend James Blair**
by J. Hargraves, England, 1705, signed & dated
dimensions: 30"h x 25"w
College of William and Mary

**Sarah Harrison (Mrs. James) Blair**
by J. Hargraves, England, 1705, possibly signed & dated
dimensions: 30"h x 25"w
College of William and Mary

**Reverend James Blair**
by Charles Bridges, Virginia, c.1735-45
dimensions: 30"h x 25"w
College of William and Mary

**William Prentis**
by Charles Bridges, Virginia, c.1735-45
dimensions: 30"h x 25"w
Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

**Elizabeth Brooke (Mrs. William) Prentis**
by unidentified artist, Virginia (?), c.1740
dimensions: 30"h x 25"w
Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

**Dr. John Segueyra**
by William Dering, Virginia, c.1745
dimensions: 30"h x 25"w
Winterthur Museum (copy at Colonial Williamsburg Foundation)

**Robert Carter**
by Thomas Hudson, England, c.1750
dimensions: 50"h x 40"w
Virginia Historical Society

**Frances Tasker (Mrs. Robert) Carter**
by John Wollaston, Virginia, c.1755-7
dimensions: 50"h x 40"w
Colonial Williamsburg Foundation
Portraits studied
Appendix A, p.2

Peyton Randolph
by John Wollaston, Virginia, c.1755-7
dimensions: 36"h x 29"w*
Virginia Historical Society

Betty Harrison (Mrs. Peyton) Randolph
by John Wollaston, Virginia, c.1755-7
dimensions: 36"h x 29"w*
Virginia Historical Society

Henry Tazewell
by Charles Willson Peale, Virginia, 1775, signed and dated
dimensions: 30"h x 25"w
Virginia Historical Society

Dorothy Waller (Mrs. Henry) Tazewell
by Charles Willson Peale, Virginia, 1775
dimensions: 30"h x 25"w
Virginia Historical Society

Ann Barraud
by Henry Benbridge, Virginia, c.1790-1800
dimensions: 30"h x 25"w
private collection

Philip Barraud
by William Hubard, Virginia, 1830, signed and dated
dimensions: 30"h x 25"w
Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

Ann Hanson (Mrs. Philip) Barraud
by William Hubard, Virginia, 1830, signed and dated
dimensions: 30"h x 25"w
Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

*The Randolph portraits have been conserved. At some point the canvases were cut from their original 36" by 28" strainers and remounted on slightly larger strainers.
APPENDIX B

Greenblatt's Conditions Common to Most Instances of Self-Fashioning

1. None of the figures inherits a title, an ancient family tradition or hierarchical status that might have rooted personal identity in the identity of a clan or caste...

2. Self-fashioning . . . involves submission to an absolute power or authority situated at least partially outside the self--God, a sacred book, an institution such as church, court, colonial or military administration . . .

3. Self-fashioning is achieved in relation to something perceived as alien, strange, or hostile. This threatening Other--heretic, savage, witch, adulteress, traitor, Antichrist--must be discovered or invented in order to be attacked and destroyed.

4. The alien is perceived by the authority either as that which is unformed or chaotic (the absence of order) or that which is false or negative (the demonic parody of order). Since accounts of the former tend inevitably to organize and thematize it, the chaotic constantly slides into the demonic, and consequently the alien is always constructed as a distorted image of the authority.

5. One man's authority is another man's alien.

6. When one authority or alien is destroyed, another takes its place.

7. There is always more than one authority and more than one alien in existence at a given time.

8. If both the authority and the alien are located outside the self, they are at the same time experienced as inward necessities, so that both submission and destruction are always already internalized.

9. Self-fashioning is always, though not exclusively, in language.
10. The power generated to attack the alien in the name of authority is produced in excess and threatens the authority it sets out to defend. Hence self-fashioning always involves some experience of threat, some effacement or undermining, some loss of self.
APPENDIX C

*All illustrations from Claude Bragdon, The Frozen Fountain, (Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries, 1924)
THE ROOT-FIVE RECTANGLE

The area of the square on the end of a Root-Five rectangle is one fifth of the area of the square on the side. The ratio between no end and no side is 1 to 2.24 or unity to the square root of five.

The properties of the Root-Five rectangle are similar to the others described except that it provides itself into rectangles similar to the whole with ratios of five and 60.

THE WHIRLING SQUARE

The Whirling Square consists of a square on the side of the Root-Five rectangle inscribed within the whole. The whirling square rectangle and the Root-Five rectangle are placed within the square according to the following method.

The square is first divided by the line A-B to obtain a Root-Five rectangle, or two squares, from the diagonal of the square (C-D). Subtract unity or d-e to determine the point D then establishes the side of the Whirling Square Rectangle (Fig. 1). A line drawn through the point D parallel to a side of the square determines the Root-Five rectangle (Fig. 2).

THE APPLICATION OF AREAS

Root-2 Rectangle & Square

$\frac{1}{2}$ application of square $\frac{1}{3}$ application of two $\frac{1}{8}$ of one rectangle to area. As shown, Join $\frac{1}{2}$ to area, and $\frac{1}{2}$ to area to divide a square into five areas. All rectangles are divided into three squares and four root-Five rectangles (Fig. 2) if the square on the end of a Root-Five rectangle is divided into three squares and one Root-Five rectangle.

THE RECTANGLE OF THE WHIRLING SQUARES

The area of a Root-Five rectangle is an area of the Whirling Square. The Whirling Square is equal to the area of the Root-Five rectangle plus its Root-Five rectangle. If it forms one whirling square rectangle, horizontal plus one, square rectangle, for the ratio 1:618 from 2.206 to the square root of 5.618.

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Fig. 1: Whirling rectangle (also included in a square if lines are drawn through the eyes and produced to the opposite side of the square). A Root-Five rectangle is constructed in the center of the square. The rectangle on the end of a Root-Five rectangle is divided into three squares and three Root-Five rectangles (Fig. 2) if the square on the end of a Root-Five rectangle is divided into three squares and one Root-Five rectangle.
Notes for Introduction

1. The focus of this study is on eighteenth-century portraiture, but both earlier and later works will be used for comparison; it should be understood that references to "the period" or "eighteenth century" are used for simplicity even though the practice or iconography being discussed was not exclusive to the eighteenth century, but merely prevalent then. The traditional forms of portraiture discussed here materialized long before the eighteenth century and continued well into the nineteenth.


4. The segment of eighteenth-century society represented in portraiture is largely that of the elite holders of inheritable wealth; toward the end of the century and into the nineteenth century that segment widened to include the middle class. See Lovell, "Painters and Their Customers: Aspects of Art and Money in Eighteenth-Century America."

5. See discussion of Reynolds’ Discourses, etc. in Chapter I.


8. Lorne Campbell’s comments in Renaissance Portraits, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 24, are both recent and typical: "The penetrating portrait-painter does not merely reproduce what he sees before him; he may exaggerate or distort certain of his sitter’s features so as to enhance the likeness; he will almost inevitably idealise; but he
must also give some knowledge of the personality and likely behaviour of the sitter. This process, generally known as characterisation, has two principal facets: an expression of the sitter’s public identity and status, which is almost always desired; and an analysis of his private self, which may not always be strictly desirable but which came to be expected."


12. Curry, p.95.

13. Ibid.


15. Thomas, p.383.


17. Ibid.


19. Ibid.


29. Hersey, p. 15.


Notes for Chapter I


2. Greenblatt, p. 9.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Lovell, "To Be 'Conspicuous in the Croud': John Singleton Copley's *Sir William Pepperrell and His Family*.

7. Ibid.


11. Byrd owned over forty-five paintings, which he displayed in his "gallery" at Westover. See list in Department of Collections research file, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

13. The portrait painted by Kneller during one of Byrd’s trips to London c. 1700-4 or c. 1715-21 is now in the collection of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. A copy after the Kneller canvas by Closterman is in the collection of the Virginia Historical Society.

14. A portrait located by Mark R. Wenger, a Colonial Williamsburg architectural historian, may be that of John Perceval, but its condition prohibits analysis in this study.

15. Reynolds, p.xvi.


17. Ibid.


22. Reynolds, p.72.


26. Ibid.


28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.


34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. Miller, p.127.


38. "Arria was the wife of Caecina Paetus, who, when her husband was ordered to death under the emperor Claudius taught her husband how to die, stabbing herself and handing him the dagger with the words 'Paete, non dolet' ('It doesn't hurt, Paetus.')" The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature, M. C. Howatson, ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p.63.

39. Dryden, for example, in the above cited poem alludes to Raphael; one J. Roberts on Kneller referred to Raphael, Guido [Reni], Carracci, Corregio, Paulo [Veronese], and Titian (see Poesch); and the above cited ode to Peale compares him to Rubens.

40. Bushrod Washington was George Washington’s nephew who inherited Mt. Vernon after the lifetime occupancy of Martha Washington.


42. Ibid.
43. Ibid.


47. Furhman, p.36.


51. Ibid.


53. Fortune, p. 309.

54. Ibid.

55. Fortune, p. 310.

**Notes for Chapter II**

1. Reynolds, p.77.

2. Reynolds, p.46.


4. Both statues are in the Vatican Museum.


8. I have found more variation in the actual dimensions of full-length portraits than in the other three sizes. Mansfield Talley’s thorough examination of the technical literature (Portrait Painting in England: Studies in the Technical Literature before 1700, p. 250) states "the whole-length usually measures approximately 90" x 60." The method for determining the shapes of portrait canvases explored here may suggest that a larger margin of error existed for the largest portraits.

9. Talley, Portrait Painting in England: Studies in the Technical Literature before 1700 (Great Britain, 1981). Talley’s work deals with the seventeenth-century, but the artists’ technical practices did not differ significantly from those of the eighteenth century, based on individual sources consulted by this author.

10. Talley, p. 133.

11. Ibid.


14. Campbell, The London Tradesman (1747); Diderot, Recueil de Planches, sur les Sciences, les Arts Liberaux, et les Arts Mechaniques, avec leur Explication (1751-72); Dossie, The Handmaid to the Arts (1758); Hogarth, Analysis of Beauty (1791); Reynolds, Discourses on Art (1791).


16. Miller, p. 60.

17. Sellers, p. 11.

18. Calculations include one inch on all four sides of a canvas to allow for tacking edges.

19. See, for example, garment-cutting layouts in Diderot.


22. Reynolds, p. 46.


31. Geometric systems of proportion based on modular units are more easily understood as "symmetrical" to the modern viewer; such systems have also been used by designers from the ancient Greeks to the present. For a discussion of various systems of proportion see Jonathan L. Fairbanks, "America’s Measure of Mankind," *Smithsonian Studies in American Art*, vol. 2, no. 1, winter 1988, pp. 73-87.

32. Johnson, *Dictionary of the English Language*.

33. Reynolds, p.47.


35. The eighteenth-century term for a canvas measuring 50" x 40" was "half-length," even though three-fourths of the sitter’s body was shown. The 30" x 25" "bust-length" canvas was sometimes called a "three-quarter" length because the fabric measured three-fourths of one yard.

36. Because the compasses illustrated in this paper do not have leads or pens for marking, they could also be called "dividers." The two terms were interchangeable in the period, according to Jay Gaynor, curator of mechanical arts for Colonial Williamsburg. In primary documents one sometimes sees references to "compass with pen," or "compass with point" to designate marking capability. Dividers are always considered to be compasses, but the implement capable
of leaving a mark is only called a compass.

37. Diderot and numerous period paintings and engravings of artists' studios often show compasses, straight edges, maulsticks, brushes, and palettes, but not rulers.

38. Stewart, p. 66.

39. The Oxford English Dictionary defines "Kit-cat" as the nickname given to Christopher Catling, keeper of a pie-house in Shire Lane, by Temple Bar, London, where a group of Whig politicians originally met. Sir Godfrey Kneller painted these politicians (his friends) and devised a new format for their portraits.


42. Stewart, pp. 66-67.

43. Rembrandt made a sketch of Raphael's portrait of Castiglione, even noting in the margins the price fetched by another Raphael painting, but regrettably he did not note the dimensions of either work. See Bob Haak, Rembrandt His Life, His Work, His Time, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1969), pp.162-163.


45. Ibid.


47. Bragdon, pp. 52-53.


51. Gibbs, pl. LIV.


55. Now called the Grisell-Hay Lodging, but known to architectural historian Marcus Whiffen’s generation as the Archibald Blair house.

56. The term "folk" seems an unsatisfactory descriptor for works of art created by non-academically-trained artists, but as I have no suggestion for a better adjective, I will defer to art-historical tradition. Very few of the portraits in *American Folk Portraits*, edited by Beatrix Rumford, (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1981) have the dimensions of 30" x 25", 36" x 28", or 50" x 40". The folk portraits’ measurements cover a wide and varied range. Of those few in the above volume that do conform to the standard sizes for academic portraits, it appears that the artists either had some formal training or had been associated with formally trained artists at some time. Cf. Rumford’s entries for "folk" painters James Herring, William Jennys, James Peale, and Cephas Thompson who used the standard sizes for their canvases.


Notes for Chapter III


3. The portrait of Anne Randolph is in the collection of the Virginia Historical Society.


7. The Ashley trade card was owned by The Book Press of Williamsburg in June 1992.


11. Johnson’s Dictionary of the English Language defines "antick" as "he that plays anticks; he that uses odd gesticulation: a buffoon."


15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.


20. Ibid.


26. Ibid.


28. Ibid.

29. Hersey, p.11.


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VITA

Jessica Lauren Brown Suber


Employed by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation since 1981, media coordinator for the department of collections since 1985. In 1988 assumed additional responsibilities as paintings researcher.